Strength-based Approaches to Youth Gang Prevention in B.C.

Community Consultation Paper

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Disclaimer

This research report was prepared by **Gira Bhatt, Roger Tweed, and Stephen Dooley.** The views or opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the British Columbia Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General

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Executive Summary

This paper discusses strength-based strategies for reducing youth involvement in gang violence. The current discussion is meant to provoke thought and provide some theoretical background. This discussion includes a review of research on strengths that matter, some cautions such as concerns about cultural relevance, and a differentiation of types of strength-based interventions. It also explores some strength-based practices with examples of specific strategies implemented by the *Community Assessment and Action Networks*. The paper includes feedback from three workshops conducted with community stakeholders on March 24th 2010 consultation hosted by the BC Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General. The discussion concludes with recommendations to connect evidence-based research with practice. This discussion paper provides background that may help people considering strength-based interventions.

Strengths-Based Approaches to Reduce Youth Gang Violence

Gang shootings in BC over the last decade have provoked much fear and also concern over the involvement of youth in gang related violence. To address this issue, traditional approaches typically examine risk factors, "deficits," and other problems to explain why youth join gangs, and these in turn provide guidance for development of programs for youth-at-risk. In this paper, a different approach is discussed, targeting and developing youth strengths that prevent or reduce involvement in gangs, criminal activities, and violence.

Strength-based interventions deserve attention. The alternative, deficit-based interventions for youth rely on identifying troubles among youth and overcoming those troubles. A time and place exist for this approach, but deficit approaches have disadvantages. First, people may tire of hearing about problems in their community. Second, youth may often be repelled by programs that highlight their deficits. Third, and most importantly, strengths matter and can facilitate youth success.

The focus of this paper is a two-fold exploratory discussion of the utility of strength-based approaches for addressing youth violence in BC. First, we provide a review of academic literature on strength-based approaches to create a context for the discussion. Second, we provide a summary of consultations with service providers, parents, and youth with whom we discussed the 'lay of the land' regarding current utilization of strength-based approaches to support the needs of at-risk youth.

Before proceeding however, a disclaimer is warranted. While we did have a number of very detailed discussions of strength-based approaches with service providers across BC, this paper does not provide a comprehensive inventory of all such programs in the province. The discussion of current programs was meant to be contextual; what we know from the literature to more localized issues and concerns. In this sense the examples discussed give food for thought in terms of how to advance strength-based approaches at the level of service delivery.

Literature Review

Research literature on youth strengths suggests to three major themes: i) Social strengths, ii) Personal strengths, and iii) Strengths of belief. Examining these three domains would provide a context for making decision as to which strengths to target in strength-based intervention for youth involvement in crimes and gang activities.

I) Social Strengths

Significant research suggests that good social relations predict positive outcomes for youth. In particular, youth who have the following relations tend to do well in many ways (Hanson & Kin, 2007): positive relations with peers, with other community members, with household members, and with people at school. The best relations include a sense of care for the youth, high expectations placed upon the

youth, and a sense of meaningful participation for the youth. Youth with these social assets are significantly more likely to display a number of positive outcomes including higher grades, and lower levels of physical fighting, and substance use.

Many strategies can build these relations. For example, volunteer work or contribution to a social activist group or religious group can build these relations. Participation in sports can build these relations. Likewise, within the school, a broad variety of extracurricular groups such as sports, social action, or social planning groups can help build these relations.

II) Personal Strengths

Personal strengths also matter. For example, mainstream scientific concepts such as self-esteem (but not narcissism), a sense of control over one's life, and an ability to delay gratification seem to predict positive outcomes for youth. However, one qualification should be mentioned in regard to self-esteem. Self-esteem is a belief that you have worth and are valuable. Self-esteem tends to be associated with positive outcomes for youth. However, belief that one is better than others is not the same as self-esteem. Belief that you are better than others is instead part of narcissism (Thomaes, Stegge, Bushman, Olthof, & Denissen, 2008). The other components of narcissism include entitlement (Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009) and/or exaggerated responses to threat (vulnerability; Wink, 1991). Significant evidence suggests that narcissism predicts increased levels of aggression (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998). Thus, service providers for youth must be careful to build self-esteem without increasing narcissism.

Also, traditional virtues such as gratitude, altruism, and a tendency to forgive have been attracting increased attention from scientific researchers. These types of personal strengths contribute to pro-social behaviour and promote well-being, which may further reduce the likelihood that youth will opt for negative identities that include violence. In fact, the emergence of traditional virtues as predictors of well-being is one of the more robust findings in recent years of research on well-being (Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009).

Exercises that build the traditional virtues lead to increased happiness (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). In one study, a large group of people completed a measure of personal strengths, and then tried to use their top strengths in new ways on a regular basis. The group showed improvements in well-being lasting at least six months. Therapists can struggle to achieve such significant effects, yet in this case, no therapist was involved. This simple exercise produced improvements lasting 6 months. The VIA (Values in Action) research group has developed a scientifically-based measure of 24 character strengths that have been valued as virtues in many cultures (Seligman & Peterson, 2004). The personal strengths in their model include factors such as leadership, humility, gratitude, and forgiveness. Their test assessing these strengths is available free for personal use at www.viastrengths.org.

III) Strengths of Belief

There is considerable evidence supporting the importance of belief in the good will of others. This belief predicts lower levels of violence among youth. In particular, all people will at times be hurt physically or emotionally by others. Sometimes these slights are malicious (i.e., one youth purposely hurting another), and at times accidental. Some youth are more likely to assume good will within the person who caused the trouble (i.e., assume the slight is accidental). These youth are significantly less likely to act out in violence (Crick, 1995). This belief in the good will of others seems to protect against involvement in violence.

Of course, building this type of trust in others can be difficult. Caring engagements from service providers and others may increase the likelihood that youths will assume that others care, and thus protect against involvement in violence. Thus, social assets may contribute to both personal strengths and strengths of belief that protect against involvement in violence.

The Search Institute Model

A very popular model for targeting youth strengths is that of the Search Institute (www.search-institute.org). This model uses the term "Developmental Assets" and includes 40 assets that can help guide positive youth development. The model has received widespread attention, and has been helpful for spurring further attention to strength-based interventions. Furthermore, there is evidence that higher scores on some of the Search Institute measures are associated with a variety of positive outcomes for youth including reduced levels of violence.

Some academics however, have expressed concerns about the Search Institute materials because data from the materials and even some of the methods for calculating the asset scores are not freely available. Thus, the claims coming from the Search Institute cannot always be verified. Furthermore, there is limited evidence that the testing materials actually succeed at measuring 40 different assets. Thus, the materials may not meet the standards of openness often considered necessary for scientific adequacy. Nonetheless, the Search Institute model, in spite of having some problems in terms of reception from social scientists, has received much attention and has spurred positive actions for supporting youth.

Some Limitations and Cautions

Role of Culture: Cultural background may influence receptivity to strength-based interventions. A Global Gallup Poll (Hodges & Clifton, 2004) asked, "*Which would help you be more successful in your life—knowing what your weaknesses are and attempting to improve your weaknesses, or knowing what your strengths are and attempting to build on your strengths?*" (p. 256). The results suggest that people from the United States, the UK, and Canada tend to be particularly receptive to strength-based strategies. People from France, Japan, and China, in contrast may tend to be less interested (Hodges & Clifton,

2004). The cultural relevance is worth noting. The strength-oriented approach may be particularly motivating and relevant to people who have spent their lives in North America or the UK. That appealing quality is part of the advantage of strength-based interventions. However, the strength-based model may not be as culturally relevant to all Canadians.

Pathologies: Also, even though strength-based approaches can have value, pathologies sometimes deserve attention. In some cases, pathologies can limit the display of strengths. Thus, the pathologies may also need treatment (e.g., bi-polar disorder). The strength-based model has advantages over the deficit model, but will not be superior in all cases either because some people will not be receptive or because particular pathologies truly need attention.

Social Sensitivity: Also, a certain social sensitivity will be needed when building strengths. We now know that emotional distress can be reduced among many people by a focus on building character strengths such as gratitude (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). In fact, the pervasive power of gratitude has been one of the more surprising findings to emerge in social science in the last decade. Nonetheless, telling people, especially people in very difficult circumstances, to be grateful can be cruel. In the semi-autobiographical Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Persig (1974) sums up this concern. He noticed that his friends were ungrateful for what they had, and as a result, were frustrated. He considered telling them to be grateful, so they would stop frustrating themselves. But he decided that sermonizing would not help: He said to himself, "…*ingratitude, that's what it is. Blind alley, though. If someone's ungrateful and you tell him he's ungrateful, okay, you've called him a name. You haven't solved anything*" (p. 52). These concerns do have some foundation, and caution is warranted when trying to build strengths in people experiencing distress. Sermonizing may simply frustrate and repel those individuals.

Focus on Youth **and** Family: Also, strength-based models will go astray if attention is always directed towards the youth and not directed towards the family. Kazdin (2005) has constructed one of the few systems shown to successfully reduce conduct disorder among youth. The strangest characteristic of his therapy is that he does not target the youth. He instead treats the parents. He argues that parents spend many hours each week with a child, but he, the therapist, has limited contact. Thus, he can magnify his impact by teaching parents how to intervene with the child during their many hours of contact.   In contrast, he would be unlikely to spend more than an hour week with the youth and that contact may last only a few months. Similarly, the Vancouver School District's SACY program (School Age Children and Youth substance abuse prevention) provides an example of a program that targets not only youth, but also seeks to increase parental and teacher involvement in preventing youth substance abuse.

Intervention strategies

Two different types of strength-based interventions are possible. Some will target all youth, but others will target only youth at risk. Those targeting all youth tend to focus on developing positive behaviours and identities that may protect against many types of pathology including delinquency and violence.

<u>Strength Building Programs Targeting All Youth</u>: Programs that target all youth fit well with a public health perspective. This perspective suggests that population-wide interventions can drastically reduce pathology. Even relatively minor improvements in health related behaviour across a population (e.g., each person walking a few more minutes a day) can significantly reduce the frequency of related pathologies (e.g., heart disease). Likewise, when all children experience strengths-building curriculum, even small resulting improvements in well-being may significantly reduce the frequency of pathologies (e.g., being less likely to turn to violence or crime for a sense of meaning).

For example, social strengths may be strengthened with programs such as service learning. Service learning involves students in activities that meet community needs. Students can plant community gardens, visit the elderly, volunteer at hospitals, or take part in any of many different opportunities. This type of activity can provide the youth with meaningful community participation, a positive identity, and relations with positive role models. These factors can all lead to improved outcomes for youth. For example, the Tong Louie YMCA operates a *Youth Leadership Development* program which involves youth in volunteer work. That program may soon be expanded to also help youth at risk develop leadership and service skills.

Also, personal strengths can be bolstered with programs such as *Strengths Gym* (Proctor & Fox Eades, 2009), a curriculum-based program designed to build character strengths among school-children. The curriculum is based on empirical evidence regarding strengths that matter (Proctor, Linley, Maltby, & Wood, 2010). Furthermore, the curriculum is undergoing rigorous testing to assess its effectiveness. The data currently available suggest that the curriculum does build strengths and that these same strengths contribute to increased well-being (Proctor et al., 2010).

Similarly, the *Penn Resilience Program* builds personal strengths by teaching behaviours, thinking skills, and social problem solving skills that protect against negative mental health outcomes (Gillham, Reivich, Freres, Lascher, Litzinger, Shatté, & Seligman, 2006). Seligman (Seligman, Reivich, Jaycox, & Gillham, 1995) sought to develop a mental health equivalent to the polio vaccine. Just as the polio vaccine eradicated the polio epidemic that caused much fear during his youth, he sought to develop a curriculum that could protect kids who were at risk of becoming depressed. Studies have supported the efficacy of the program.

Also, projects encouraging constructive leisure activities for youth may bolster both personal strengths and social strengths. Participation in structured leisure activities (e.g., community sports, lessons of a variety of types, Scouts, religious organizations, volunteer groups...) is associated with prosocial behaviour and reduced the risk of adverse outcomes for youth (e.g., Morrissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005). These types of activities provide increased opportunities for youth to feel connected to their community and to feel successful.

Some evidence suggests that particular types of structured activities are especially beneficial. In particular, youth may especially benefit from activities that have established performance standards or require significant effort and provide opportunities for identity expression (e.g., sports, arts, or leadership; Morrissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005). These types of activities often allow creativity and/or service to others, and build connection to adults in the community. Some research suggests that lack of awareness of opportunities is one of the biggest barriers to youth involvement in these activities (Morrissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005). Also, other strategies can reduce other barriers to involvement in structured out-of-school activities. In particular, financial barriers and/ or transportation limitations can stop many youth from involvement. Thus further tax incentives for these types of activities (e.g., community sports, music lessons, volunteer programs) could significantly increase involvement. However, many low income people do not pay income tax, so any tax incentive would need to be refundable so that even people of low income could benefit from this incentive. Transportation problems also increase barriers. Many families will not let their children roam the neighbourhood alone, but often structured youth activities are out of sight of the home. Thus, transportation may sometimes be necessary to allow involvement in the type of high expectation, structured activities that seem especially beneficial.

Strength Building Programs Targeting Youth-At-Risk: An alternative model would instead target youth who are already encountering problems. For example, for people involved in the criminal justice system, strength-based re-entry programs have been explored (Maruna & LeBel, 2003). These programs can include frequent contact with justice officials, opportunities to repair the harm that has been done, and opportunities to contribute to the community (e.g., devote hours to a Habitat for Humanity building project). These strength-based re-entry programs also offer reward for achievements more often than punishment for deviations (Maruna & LeBel, 2003). Some such strength-based models of case management put great emphasis on empowering clients to use their own strengths and resources to overcome difficulties in their own unique ways (e.g., Blundo, 2001). In some ways, the existing R*estorative Justice Programs* for youth (e.g., the one operated by Touchstone Family Association in Richmond) likewise build strengths.

Some specific guidance for strength-based therapy comes from the Canadian professor and therapist Michael Unger (2006). He has written extensively about strength-base therapy for youth and has

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developed a questionnaire called the *Resilience Youth Strengths Inventory* which can help caregivers learn about strengths of at-risk youth. Youth and caregivers can use the results as a guide for finding adaptive strategies for expressing youth strengths.

Strength-based interventions have great potential. Strength-based interventions do benefit youth and can help youth build positive identities that will protect them from involvement in gang-related violence. The table below provides an 'at a glance' summary of the literature on the efficacy of strength based approaches.

Summary of Literature Review

Strengths Identified in Past Research	Source
* P*ositive relations* with peers, other community members, household members, and people at school	Hanson & Kin (2007)
* *Positive school environment, Academic success, Home-school interconnectedness*	(*Feinberg* et al. 2007, Kelly & Caputo, 2005)
*L*eadership, Humility, Gratitude, Forgiveness* (*Traditional virtues*)	(Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009)
* O*ptimism, Hope, Self-esteem*	(Carjaval. 1998),
* *Communication skills of parents*	(Thomas, Holzer, & Wall, 2004)
* *Assumption of goodwill among others*	Crick (1995)
* *Creativity, Curiosity, Critical Thinking (Wisdom & Knowledge)* * *Bravery, Perseverance, Honesty, Zest (Courage)* * *Capacity to love and be loved, Kindness (Humanity)* * *Teamwork, Fairness, Leadership (Justice)* * *Forgiveness, Humility, Self-regulation (Temperance)* * *Gratitude, Appreciation of beauty, Hope, Spirituality (Transcendence)*	Seligman & Peterson (2004) www.viastrengths.org
* *40 Developmental Assets of Adolescents* (12-18) (See **Appendix A** for a complete list)	The Search Institute www.search-institute.org

A variety of interventions can help build these strengths, but cultural sensitivity is warranted. Strength-based interventions may appeal to some cultural groups more than to others. Some curricula (e.g., Strengths Gym, Penn Resiliency Program) can help build strengths in all youth at participating schools. Some programs instead target strength enhancement efforts toward youth at risk. For example, strength-based counselling, strength-based case management, and restorative justice programs target youth at risk. Strength-based programming seems to be gathering momentum in BC.

Consultations with Community Action and Assessment Networks

For this discussion paper we met with representatives from six CAANs (*Community Action and Assessment Networks*) to discuss existing and potential strategies for strength based approaches to youth violence. These communities are identified in **Appendix B**. In this process we had occasion to talk with a variety of people involved in CAAN programs and activities. The CAAN groups were a product of efforts by the Ministry of Public Safety and the Office of the Solicitor General. These groups help coordinate local efforts to decrease youth involvement in gang related activities.

Our conversations with the CAAN groups were framed within four domains:

1. **Positive characteristics and strengths that youth demonstrate**	**Q 1**: What positive characteristics and strengths of youth has your group noted through your activities involving youth?
2. **Specific programs and strategies targeting strengths**	**Q 2**: Is there any specific strategy in place that helps build character strengths of youth that would keep them out of trouble?
3. **Plans/Programs on the horizon**	**Q 3**: Have you considered implementing any strategy or action plan that would build youth capacity?
4. **Dream Big**	**Q 4**: Is there anything more that you believe should be done to target fostering youth strengths that would protect them from gang influences?

I) Positive characteristics and strengths that youth demonstrate
Q 1: What positive characteristics and strengths of youth has your group noted through your activities involving youth?

"A lot of our kids are extremely resilient and resourceful"

Without exception, the CAAN group members and service providers we talked to were able to speak to a wide array of strengths that youth bring. In particular, they noted that youth at risk frequently show i) leadership skills and charisma. In other words, they know how to move and motivate others. Many of these youth are articulate. They can speak their minds. One of the respondents did note that while youth seem to have impressive leadership skills, this skill set is often used in the pursuit of 'dark side' activities. Youth-at-risk are also ii) socially conscious. They are very aware of social issues and are conscious of fairness and justice. They are also often iii) well-connected socially to happenings in their community. Additionally, youth were observed to demonstrate a strong sense of iv) loyalty, and v) a sense of humor. Most importantly, they noted that youth are indeed very vi) resilient and are very vii) resourceful such as in finding places to sleep and finding something to eat. Many do not have a lot

and the service providers were impressed with how well the youth were often able to adapt to difficult situations.

From our conversations with service providers, it seems clear that youth do possess a great many strengths. The challenge is to identify and support the strengths of youth who are at-risk and support them to utilize their gifts in pursuit of more positive and safe goals.

II) Programs and Strategies Targeting Strength

Q 2: Is there any specific strategy in place that helps build character strengths of youth that would keep them out of trouble?

"Youth are very good at assessing the 'phony' adults and 'phony' relationships; they know when trusting relationships are not happening."

This quote from one of the service providers really stands out when considering strategies that help support and build youth strengths. While the specifications of new programs are important, the core of any strategy has to be positive relationships between the youth and those providing the service. While the significance of developing trusting relationships in any youth program was emphasized, the participants in our conversation provided some general strategies and described some specific programs.

General Strategies

Building Pre-Existing Strengths: Some service providers focused on building pre-existing strengths among youth at risk. In other words, they focus on building strengths that already seem evident among and important to youth at risk. Thus, their programs focus on leadership development and related skills. This means that the youth are given leadership early on in the program. For example, in one participant's program, the first activities in the program involve the youth in determining the goals of the program. This experience gives them a sense of involvement and significance. They learn how to positively use their power and leadership skills in the service of themselves and others.

Helping Youth Recognize their Existing Social Assets: Another participant works to help youth recognize their existing assets. He said, "*When the youth are able to accept the adults as assets in their life, then the strengths start to come out.*" Thus, successful interventions may simply help youth recognize their existing assets.

Building Less-Common Strengths: Other service providers focus on building strengths that are not necessarily common among youth at-risk. For example, building empathy and social responsibility is a major focus for one of the participants who facilitates a restorative justice program for youth. The youth entering the program may not have strengths in empathy or social responsibility, but nonetheless, the strengths can be beneficial and, according to this participant, can be built through participation in restorative justice.

Offering a Sense of Belonging: One participant observed that especially for new Canadians, "*If they don't feel a sense of belonging, then the gang will be their family.*" Thus, she recommended strong efforts to provide a sense of belonging to youth.

Addressing Poverty and Hunger: A number of participants said that poverty issues cannot be overlooked when building strengths. Many youth lack the funds to take part in the programs that offer mentorship to many youth in society (e.g., sports programs, arts programs, and other structured activities for youth). Furthermore, many of these youth at risk lack reliable food. According to one participant, "*If the basic needs aren't being met, they feel uncared for.*" Many models suggest that poverty contributes to at-risk status for youth.   Thus, poverty reduction can address some of the issues before they become problematic. Ideas such as a guaranteed annual income were mentioned as strategies for building strengths.

Youth Involvement in Program Planning: Youth participation in the development and delivery of programs was a very common theme. The youth are given leadership opportunities to support the development and delivery of programs and to provide mentorship opportunities. With the involvement of youth in such program planning, it is more likely that the programs themselves become relevant, meaningful and sustainable. For example, the South Asian Community Coalition Against Youth Violence (SACCAYV) has organized youth leadership days which are entirely led by youth who plan the agenda, activities, and lead all the components of the plan. Youth leaders facilitate the event and prepare a report.

Focus on the Individual Needs of the Youth: While the manner in which this theme is operatioinalized varied between CAAN communities, the idea is that the programs are contextualized to the specific and varied needs of youth rather than having cookie cutter programs. For example, the Kamloops CAAN has a high degree of representation from the Aboriginal community. As such they are conducting traditional canoe journeys involving aboriginal youth and the RCMP. In this way they are drawing on the strength of the aboriginal community to support at-risk youth.

Activities and Action rather than "Treatment": Strength based approaches are not designed to 'fix' youth. Rather, the programs are designed to build character by offering positive activities that keep them both motivated and meaningfully engaged. These programs include swimming, team sports, arts and crafts etc. The idea is to support the development of leadership and character in the context of activities that are fun, challenging and rewarding to the youth.

Role Models & Mentorship: A positive role model can be very influential in making youth aware of their potential to develop character strengths. Many of the programs have been designed to connect at-risk youth with role models with whom they can connect in a meaningful way. For example Bobby Singh, who plays for the BC Lions, has attended and supported a number of events sponsored by the

SACCAYV. This CAAN also utilizes the experiences of former gang members to speak to and connect with at-risk youth.

Willingness to work with families and to work for a longer period of time: One participant said that "If the child gives good word of mouth to the parents, then that opens all sorts of doors." In other words, the crux is whether the kids trust you. You can't build trust immediately. You must be willing to work with the kids across a longer time period.

Teaching Adults to Become Approachable Mentors: According to this relational strategy, one of the great challenges is not necessarily developing new programs, but instead, helping the adults in the existing programs learn how to become approachable mentors. In fact, one participant contended; "*It's not so much about the content of the programs, but the people in them*." He said that swim coaches, teachers, or many others can provide many valuable strength building opportunities for youth if they understand the value and centrality of relationships in building strengths. Another said, "*Youth desire a real personable interaction with the person that is teaching them*". One youth said he wants to have someone who can be an example in his life.

Specific Programs

While the programs we will be discussing are not all explicitly designed as strength-based approaches, the indirect outcomes seem to be inevitably the emergence of strengths among the youth engaged in these programs. These include belief and confidence in self, ability to solve problems, building meaningful connections with peers and adults, and acquiring new learning such as leadership, effective communication skills, self-advocacy, and courage to find alternatives to gang involvement. Also, the dedicated youth leaders provide role models and motivate youth to excel.

Before we briefly mention some specific programs, we reiterate that this section of the report does not provide an exhaustive list of strength-based approaches being implemented in the CAANs. Rather the discussion of specific strength-based approaches is meant as a 'broad strokes' exercise; to highlight some example initiatives which can serve as a backdrop for a more informed discussion of practical considerations regarding strength based approaches in the 'real world' of program delivery. Here the discussion provides a link between what we know from the literature on strength based approaches and what communities across BC are trying to implement at the local level.

Examples of Specific Programs:

The Wrap program: After systematically identifying high school youth as being most at risk, the program team gathers various community resources and social supports that "wrap" around the youth and "protect" them. The activities include sports and recreation, arts and crafts, camping trips, theater, dance and individually-focused interactions with the program team.

Street Smart: This program brings together 15 youth at-risk who complete community service twice a week for a period of 12 weeks. The youth determine the context of each session. They receive an honorarium while learning alternatives to gang involvement.

Acadia Transitional Housing: This program focuses on helping youth where they are at and identifying where they want to be. They focus on finding the resilience sources they have and helping youth know where they get resilience now.

The Four Directions: In this program an alternate school within the school system is created for a specific group of target youth. They come there when they can't function well in the school system. That environment provides a more flexible learning context and provides social and emotional support with a strong cultural focus. The workers focus on building students' identity.

Postcard Project: The aim of this project is to facilitate youth leadership and gratitude. The youth involved all pick a mentor who has positively influenced their lives, and then write a postcard expressing gratitude to that individual. The adults initiate the project, but then youth run the project and facilitate involvement of other youth.

Media Showcase Events are aimed at empowering the youth and the community by providing positive media coverage. These events are attended by the media as well as the policy makers, local MLAs, MPS, The events provide a platform for emphasizing the achievements of the youth and the community.

III) Plans/Programs on the Horizon

Q 3: Have you considered implementing any strategy or action plan that would build youth capacity?

"Priority is about the relationships – relationships that have been broken"

We also asked the CAAN representatives to describe upcoming strength-building projects. Within the context of gang life, there are relationships, many of which are based on a high degree of trust and loyalty. The aim for strength based approaches has to be in part, creating a shift in the dynamics of youth relationships with peers, with teachers and other adults. The relationships that have been broken need to be mended. The youth need to feel a high degree of trust, kinship and loyalty with the adults in their lives to move forward. Acknowledging this, many of the CAAN programs on the horizon have at their core the value of building trust between youth and those providing service.

In some cases the focus of building trust is addressing past behavior and making things right with victims and the community. For example, in Richmond, the CAAN plans to further build Restorative Justice programs in schools. It is also working towards developing a larger network of community support for sharing information. The Kamloops CAAN is developing the Leadership Resiliency program

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(LRP) with funding from NCPC. The program is designed to provide support for youth between "3 and bed", that is, after school when many high risk behaviours occur. The *SACCCAYV* CAAN is looking at advocating for Exit Strategies for diverse groups of youth who may be already gang-involved but looking for safe avenues to exit. The goal is to share knowledge between different stakeholders including law enforcement and academic institutions and get support from political leaders.

IV) Ideal Dreams

Q 4: Is there anything more that you believe should be done to target fostering youth strengths that would protect them from gang influences?

"The lure of gangs is powerful; we need to shift the culture"

"We need to look at why youth feel so alienated in our culture"

We asked the CAAN representatives to dream big about strength-building projects. The two quotes above reflect what we heard in response to the "dream big" question. They both draw attention to the point that youth gang violence cannot be separated from larger social issues at work in society. Whether it be poverty, alienation, family violence, social isolation, the list goes on and on as there are a number of social forces that impact youth violence. A number of specific suggestions were made.

Youth Hub: A location such as a youth hub building was sometimes mentioned as being important in providing a safe place to which youth will come. This would provide connections and legitimacy to the people who provide services through this facility. In turn, the youth may be more likely to take advantage of the services provided therein.

Connecting Communities through On-Line Tools: The CAAN members expressed a need for a central information sharing place to communicate ideas and share resources. Since all CAAN groups share a common goal of addressing youth violence, such a central "warehouse" could reduce the likelihood of reinventing the wheel and wasting resources.

Expanding the Community Network : It was pointed out that CAAN programs must be supported by the community at large. Several participants argued that a significant gap exists between correctional programs for youth and other community programs. They argued that while they are in the system, youth receive many programs. Youth who leave the custody center are not fully prepared or trained to make a smooth re-entry in to the community. Consequently, once they are released, the freedom the youth experience is increased drastically. One participant argued that providing more structured programming for recently released youth could ease this transition and provide helpful guidance. Inviting various private and non-profit organizations to join hands could make this re-entry possible so that youth would not need to seek safety amidst gang involved individuals.

Transit/Transportation Costs: Many programs are not used fully by the youth due to issues with transit. A coordinated effort involving the transit system (e.g., free passes), taxi companies, and other private companies may help address this deficit

Time: A major challenge for service providers is the flexibility of time to work with youth. Whereas the paid service providers often work regular day shifts ending typically in the early evening. There is a need for services for youth in the late evenings and weekends.

Cultural Competence: The ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity among youth means that a "One size fits all" approach may be unsuccessful and may even damage the youth by creating a deeper sense of alienation. Cultural competence among service providers may reduce this sense of alienation.

The opportunity to lead three workshops with community stake-holders provided additional insight into strength-based approaches for addressing youth gang-involvement. In the workshop we conducted interactive exercises.

In one exercise, participants selected the most important strength domain for keeping youth out of trouble. In other words, they selected the strength domain that most deserves attention from people attempting to protect youth. The strength domains included Personal Strengths, Social Strengths, Strengths of Belief, and Observed Strengths (strengths that tend to be seen among at-risk youth). The following table illustrates the choices made by participants of the three workshops.

Q: Which is the most important strength domain for protecting youth?

Strength Domain	**Number of Workshop Participants Selecting this Domain**

Social Strengths
Strong connection to School, Household members, Peers, Community
Sense that people in each of these groups:
    Care about the youth, Have high expectations for positive behavior,
    Provide opportunities for meaningful participation
	50

Personal Strengths Self-Esteem (liking oneself) but not narcissism (thinking oneself is better than others), Sense of control over one's situation, Ability to delay gratification, Character strengths: Gratefulness, Humility, Forgiveness	**38**
Observed Strengths among Youth-at-risk Leadership skills, Charisma, Social awareness, Being well-connected with what is happening in the community, Resourcefulness, Loyalty, Resilience, Sense of Humour	**30**
Belief Strengths Believe in many different reasons to not commit crimes Believe that many other people have good (or at least not bad) intentions for the youth	**25**

All domains were perceived as particularly important by at least some participants. Nonetheless, the highest number of participants indicated that Social Strengths are most important, followed by the domains of Personal Strengths, Observed Strengths, and Belief Strengths.

Participants also described a) why they thought the domain to be particularly important, b) programs and activities that are currently available, and c) what could be improved to support at-risk kids in this domain. A more detailed summary of the exercise is provided in **Appendix C**.

Proposal for an Integrative Model to Prevent Youth Gang Involvement

Many CAAN participants already value strength-based interventions and many already work to build strengths rather than merely reduce problems. This review suggests that this strength-based orientation has value. The participants may not agree on which strengths are most important to build (social, personal, observed, or strengths of belief). Nonetheless, many support the value of this approach

Drawing from our research and our conversation with the CAAN members, parents, and youth, we propose the following:

- <u>Continue with the current practices</u> and programs which build strengths.
- <u>Promote greater involvement of the community at large</u> in addressing youth gang involvement and strength-based interventions. A <u>dialogue event</u> for communities and private companies as well as non-profit organizations could be held to continue the conversation on strength development. At this event, strength-based interventions could be experienced, mutual needs could be identified, and interventions to address each strength domain could be promoted.
- Develop <u>strategies that target strength domains (social, personal, observed, or strengths of belief) receiving little attention in particular regions</u>. Each community could <u>develop at least three such programs</u> within their local contexts. These programs should complement existing programs.
- A <u>central information e-tool could be developed</u> allowing access to shared resources, information, and perspectives among CAAN groups on strengths that matter. Such a tool could create greater interactions among CAAN groups, provide a venue for sharing ideas and resources, and prevent re-inventing the wheel.
- <u>Youth Hub</u> centers could be created at various venues to create safe space where the youth are invited to participate in activities which are fun and which heighten self-competence
- <u>Attempts could be made to identify culture-specific strengths within each community</u>. These must be followed by developing culture-specific strategies and strength promoting activities.
- <u>Youth events that celebrate youth and community achievements</u> in all areas of life could be hosted annually bringing together communities from across the province.

Questions and Directions for Future Research/Practice on Strength-based Approaches

1. Should strength-based approaches also target youth who are negotiating their adolescence relatively well? (e.g., schools programs building strengths often ignored in current curriculum)

2. What age group should be targeted for strength based programs?

3. Should peer leadership be mandatory in high schools?

4. Who may provide mentorship/positive role models to high school students?

5. Should cultural competence in strength-based approaches be a mandatory part of the training of high school youth workers?

6. What specific role can teachers play in fostering strengths?

7. What specific role can parents/families play in fostering strengths?

8. What specific role can the media play in fostering strengths?

9. What specific strategies may empower youth so they can take on advocacy roles?

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Appendix A

40 Developmental Assets of Adolescents (The Search Institute Model)

Domain	External	Domain	Internal
Support	1 Family support 2 Positive Family Communication 3 Other Adult Relationships 4 Caring Neighbourhood 5 Caring School Climate 6 Parent Involvement in Schooling	**Commitment to Learning**	21 Achievement Motivation 22 School Engagement 23 Homework | 24 Bonding to School 25 Reading for Pleasure
Empowerment	7 Community Values Youth 8 Youth as Resources 9 Service to Others 10 Safety	**Positive Values**	26 Caring 27 Equality and Social Justice 28 Integrity 29 Honesty 30 Responsibility 31 Restraint
Boundaries & Expectations	11 Family Boundaries 12 School Boundaries 13 Neighborhood Boundaries 14 Adult Role Models 15 Positive Peer Influence 16 High Expectations	**Social Competencies**	32 Planning and Decision Making 33 Interpersonal Competence 34 Cultural Competence | 35 Resistance Skills 36 Peaceful Conflict Resolution
Constructive use of Time	17 Creative Activities 18 Youth Programs 19 Religious Community 20 Time at Home	**Positive Identity**	37 Personal Power 38 Self-Esteem 39 Sense of Purpose 40 Positive View of Personal Future

Appendix B

Community Action and Assessment Networks

- Vancouver School District
- Surrey School District
- Abbotsford Community Services
- Touchstone Family Association, Richmond
- MOSAIK (South Asian Community Coalition Against Youth Violence)
- City of Kamloops

The "Four Corners" Exercise at the Workshop: March 24, 2010

During a portion of the workshop, we facilitated a 30-minute interactive session to foster discussion among workshop participants about strength based approaches. In this exercise participants were asked to identify which of the four strength domains (Personal, Social, Beliefs and Observed) was most important to them, and to physically move to the corner of the room where the identified domain appeared on a flip chart. Participants then worked in smaller groups (of varying size based on domain choice) to answer the following questions:

- **Why is this the most important domain?**
- **What programs or activities are currently available to support at-risk youth in this domain?**
- **What could be improved to support at-risk kids in this domain?**

Each group was asked to identify a note taker and spokesperson for the group. At the end of each session the spokesperson provided a brief summary of the smaller group discussion to all workshop participants.

The following is a record of all responses to each of the questions for each domain. In providing this record our goal was to record the flip chart responses verbatim. While for the most part we achieved this goal, in a few instances the written record was not legible. These responses have been left out of the summary.

Strength Domains: Written Responses of Workshop Groups : Since several groups wrote about each strength domain, some repetition occurred. That repetition is retained to give a feel for the overall pattern of responses.

Corner I: OBSERVED STRENGTHS

Examples of Observed Strengths : Networking abilities, Social awareness, Charisma, Loyalty, Sense of humor

Why is this the most important domain?

• A building block for progress.	• Building block
• A tool to engage	• Easier to initiate strength-building externally as youth may not be able to identify their strengths initially.
• Builds rapport	
• You can use it to show youth what they have and how the skill can be used positively.	• Good way to accept them as they are
• Focusing on these supports youth to identify and utilize strengths (for self identity).	• Emphasized resiliency: Takes away shame and blame.
• Carries over to other environments and situations.	• Tools they already have
• Provides tools to validate youth	• Can build on them
• You meet them where they are at (they already have these)	• Positive skills
	• Encourages them to change because they already possess them
• Trust issue/building relationship	• This is what may empower them to change
• Observable/concrete	• When we use examples/experiences from their lives, it is easier for them to learn and expand from them
• Easiest: don't have to talk them into it	

What programs or activities are currently available to support at-risk youth in this domain?

- Outreach programs - Services of support/supervision: Long term is the key. 40 developmental assets program. - Look at the communities strengths (drama groups, recreation programs, arts/music, sports...) - Clubs at school (at lunch hour and after school) - Key element is appropriate staffing and their skills (listen, not preach) - Activities that encourage advocacy for themselves (and others): "Leave out violence" - Programs that transform "mistakes" into positive learning experiences	- Programs that hand over control to youth: Developed and led by youth: "Drummaking workshop" - Making sure "classroom" environment is not just office space/sterile (e.g., campfire). Showing youth different spaces: Discussions often evolve in diverse spaces (road trips...) - Employment programs Sports programs – Nighthoops, Bash hockey, drop in centres - Cultural programs – drumming, dancing, singing, cooking - Mentorship – youth/peer leadership; peer to peer street outreach; immigrant buddy program - Community involvement – youth advisory committees, Volunteering 1 to 1 services: transition, life skills, outreach, counseling

What could be improved to support at-risk kids in this domain?

- Consistent people - Relationships - Support the networks (volunteer plans, programs) - Identify natural helpers (support) - Need a common draw or place where it builds from. - Programming needs to be adaptive to situations - Research components can narrow programming due to requirements with respect to e.b.p.	- Need to look at/include other "spaces"/programs if something doesn't work - Adapt programming to changes with youth - One to one academic support – increase school connectivity early in the process Give youth more leadership opportunities – more emphasis on mentorship from youth who have been through similar experiences - Strength based testing – what are their strengths? - Standards for intake into programming/services - More collaboration

Corner II: Social Strengths

Examples of Social Strengths: Strong connections to family, peers, school, A sense that they all care about youth

Why is this the most important domain?

- Creates a sense of social responsibility.
- Humans work/function within groups.
- Takes a village to raise a child
- Better ability to create impact within social realm
- Social strengths are foundational
- Learn through social interaction
- We are by-products of environment
- If you don't feel that people care, you can't learn to care about self and others
- Evidence shows positive social interaction prevents social problems
- Social connections and acceptance
- Forum for youth to be heard
- Foundation/value/where I belong.
- It's comprehensive: Social acceptance lets youth overcome other deficits/build other areas
- All about relationship

- Strong buffer if connected to school identity and belonging with strong connections
- It's all interconnected
- Must be connected to <u>positive</u> social spheres
- Relationships between people
- Something we can control/improve
- Power in numbers
- Sense of trust – deeper relationship
- Peer groups – more significant than family at this age
- Internal vulnerability offset by social support
- Learn values through those around them
- Significant to be supportive, rather than aggressive
- Authentic versus phony adults
- Listening not judging
- Belonging and attachment is crucial
- Supports are very important for youth/children
- Positive role models
- Having/building positive relationships

What programs or activities are currently available to support at-risk youth in this domain?

- School, community - Sports/Recreation - Community centres - Clubs - Youth Drop-in centres - Surrey Wrap Program, - Form Theatre - ISP Prog - Challenge Day - Youth Week - Red Cross, - 4H - YMCA - Boy/Girl Scouts - Cadets - RCMP Youth Academy - Project Reach Out - Literacy Plus - Coaching, leadership opportunities through sport - centres/church groups	- Big Brothers & Big Sisters - Cultural groups - Strong start programs - neighbourhood houses - Volunteer programs - Library - Youth community events - Peer mentorship - Identity/culture-based groups - Cultural Creation -> Arts/media programs - Parents, caregivers, educators support - Art as medium to bind/promote self expression and confidence - Education and awareness activities – about specific risks - High school adult mentorship (YMCA YWCA) - Peer support based models - World Beat - Leadership activities	- Youth trained as facilitators to run peer support programs in our own communities - Youth driven peer leadership - Street spirit – education and interactive - Service learning – adult youth working together to create a community improvement - NUYU through MOSAIC - LOVE - Recreation activities – Parks and recreation – Fit to be Tried - Girl guides, Boy scouts - Schools for young parents, single father programs - Parent teen mediation – IRP - Restorative justice - Transition programs in school – community schools partnership - Buddy program (immigrant youth) - Inter-generational programs - Elders – Aboriginal programs

What could be improved to support at-risk kids in this domain?

- Early intervention 24-7 access to service - Different venues - Collaboration between service provider staff - Providing continuous service feedback - Com. Ed. and engagement - MCFD (needs overhauling and accountability) - Human resources - Financial - Role models - Mentorship - Improve the way information is delivered - Outreach to families - Culture specific - More inclusive	- Access and opportunities made available to families empower as a whole - Increased educational & support opportunities for parents - Increase funding - Good training - Community communication - Parental engagement - MCFD realities - More program to educate parents - Improved foster parent system - Create partnerships and be innovative - More focus on relationships - Consistent/long term support - More information sharing with community partners

Corner III: BELIEF STRENGTHS

Examples of Belief Strengths: Belief in different reasons not to commit crimes, Others have good intentions

Why is this the most important domain?

- Core: Sense of direction - Moral Guidance - Families' values/love instil identity - Individual footprint -> our identity - From us -> <u>Who we are</u>! - Personal/social strengths are used for our beliefs - Core -> stronger -> sense of ability - Core -> our beliefs -> better chance of survival -> the constant in life -> sense of accountability	- Moral compass - Choices - Leads into other domains - Foundational - Motivation for action - Goal oriented - Sense of purpose meaning – provides person with capacity to actually follow through on world view - Self-perception is crucial for development - Value system

What programs or activities are currently available to support at-risk youth in this domain?

- Church, after school: Christian/religious - Youth group - Community centre/neighbourhood houses - Alternative programs: Tupper, At risk, SACY, SWIS - Sports/recreation: spend more time – kids will be out of trouble - Religious institutions - Vietnamese church group 'warehouse' – Broadway church - Schools	- Sports programs - Mentorship - Multicultural clubs in schools - Principal club/lunch - Boys and Girls club - My Circle – Multicultural peer support program - Family – friends and family - Boys 4 Real – YMCA - Welcome to My Life – component – exploring values - RCMP – spring break camp

What could be improved to support at-risk kids in this domain?

- Facilities better used: Schools after hours - Open up the gym: weekends - Developing core belief is a weakness of existing programs - Which beliefs? Religious: We can't tell them what to believe - Communication? Being culturally sensitive/personal boundaries - Safe place - Require role model - Appreciative enquiry - Reinforcing Aboriginal values	- Inclusiveness - Addressing internalized racism, sexism - Connecting with culture - Reinforcing family & community unity - Environment nurtures the exploration of the Big questions - Facilitators asking questions rather than proving answers - Experimentation /exploring - Teaching openness - Safe communication place/experience - Experiential component

Corner IV: PERSONAL STRENGTHS

Examples of Personal Strengths: Gratefulness, humility, forgiveness, sense of control, appropriate self-esteem

Why is this the most important domain?

- Foundational because all starts within - Impact on other strengths - Especially important for immigrant/refugee youth - Intrinsic motivation to be successful - One needs personal strengths in order to be successful socially - In order to develop strong beliefs one needs to believe in oneself - Resiliency is fundamental - Willing to endure challenges - Positive, strong values - Need to know yourself first - Strong sense of 'right' and 'wrong' - Apathetic	- Respect oneself in order to respect others - Taught: Can't be aware of personal belief system before personal strength developed (begins day you are born) - Can be fostered/developed - Building blocks – foundations - Necessity to get through life - Resilient personality - Self-esteem - Personal responsibility - Motivation to change - Creates choice - Self-control - Creates independence/confidence/empowerment - Focusing on their strengths

What programs or activities are currently available to support at-risk youth in this domain?

• Mentorship programs • Wilderness camps • Arts, culture, sports, recreation • Family counsel: Extended family (source of history) • Counselling • Faith/belief system • Leadership/peer programs • Sports of any kind • Drop-in centres • LOVE – Vancouver	• Any pro-social activity: i.e., youth groups, band, music, drama, crafts... • Mentor programs • Wrap around • In class programs: "What I like about you is..." • Boys and Girls Club • Counseling – Plea; ONYX • Restorative Justice – accountability; understanding • Cultural buddy program	• Outdoor programs – Rediscover; Skills Envision • Prevention/intervention – RCMP programs • Big Sisters/Brothers • Connect parenting program • ReConnect • ISS – New immigrant youth program • Night-hoops • Recreation passes (including provisions for low income)

What could be improved to support at-risk kids in this domain?

• Teaching ethics in schools
• Media [Teaching kids about media]:
  ▪ How to interpret.
  ▪ Critical thinking.
  ▪ Reality versus sensationalism
• Parental support/programs for families at risk (Change the cycle)
• Education
  ▪ Coping skills
  ▪ Awareness of support systems
• "Good gangs"
  ▪ Recruitment
  ▪ Community involvement to foster personal strengths.
• Addressing kids who are slipping through the cracks in school: i.e., the quiet ones
• Help children/youth to I.D. strength
• Introduce and connect youth with the ongoing programs
	• Language appropriate
	• Connect the kids out of school or in the rural community
	• Accessibility, transport, costs, location
	• Team approach needed
	• More programs
	• Asset programs
	• Networking
	• Referrals
	• Knowledge base of available programs
	• Group empowerment
	• Prevention programs
	• Funding sources
	• More skilled outreach workers
	• Societal value on youth programs
	• Critical awareness – competing social policy makers
	• Entire social structure is in play – how much of it can we really change