

MOVING BEYOND CROSSROADS: TOWARDS A PROACTIVE PATH *BEING PROACTIVE* CONFERENCES 2011 – 2013

Looking after the Mental Health and Well-Being of Youth in Our Communities

“They are hurting and they are hurting others and they are hurting themselves. They don’t need to be locked up and further punished; what they need is help. Their disruptive behaviour is indicative of underlying issues or factors that need to be addressed.”

Dr. Theresa Shanahan
York University
Crossing Paradigms, 2011

York Centre for Education and Community (YCEC)
Toronto District School Board (TDSB)
Department of Justice Canada / Ministère de la Justice Canada (DOJ)
Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS)
Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE)

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WITH SUPPORT FROM:

York Centre for Education and Community (YCEC)



Department of Justice
Canada

Ministère de la Justice
Canada

**Supported with funds
from the
Government of Ontario**



Acknowledgements

For support and direction in helping the York Centre for Education and Community realize its social justice agenda, we owe special thanks to the YCEC Advisory Council.

We also thank our generous partners and funders of our ***Being Proactive Conferences, 2011, 2012, and 2013:***

Crossing Paradigms – Youth, Mental Health and the Justice System: An Educational Concern, March 18, 2011 Discussion Forum

- Department of Justice Canada / Ministère de la Justice Canada
- Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE)

Being Proactive I: Supporting Children and Youth Mental Health and Wellness in our Schools and Communities, February 16–17, 2012 Conference

- Department of Justice Canada / Ministère de la Justice Canada
- Toronto District School Board
- Ministry of Children and Youth Services / Ministère des Services à L’Enfance et à la Jeunesse
- Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE)

Being Proactive II: Looking after the Mental Health and Well-Being of Children and Youth in our Communities, March 22, 2013 Conference

- Department of Justice Canada / Ministère de la Justice Canada
- Ministry of Children and Youth Services / Ministère des Services à L’Enfance et à la Jeunesse
- Toronto District School Board
- Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE)

Finally, we express our sincere appreciation to report writer Heather Berkeley for compiling this report.

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Executive Summary

The York Centre for Education and Community, partnered in 2011, 2012 and 2013 with the Department of Justice (DOJ), the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS), the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), and the Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE) to host a series of multidisciplinary forums on the problem of youth violence and underlying, often undiagnosed, mental health issues. These three events were a follow-up to a meeting, *Community Mental Health Resources for Youth in the Justice System* held in Toronto, Ontario, on January 24–25, 2011, organized by YAAACE under the leadership of Devon Jones and in collaboration with the Nine Heavens Healing Academy. While each forum explored the intersectionalities of poverty and race, hopelessness, chronic stress and trauma, academic underachievement and often escalating involvement with street/gang life, each addressed as well a range of positive, proactive interventions and responses.

Out of rich dialogue and debate, [*Crossing Paradigms*](#) panelists and participants in 2011 articulated a vision to guide the hard cross-sectoral work ahead:

- Do not give up on kids who are in conflict with the law.
- Do not catastrophize their behaviour.
- Do not label them in ways that will circumscribe their future.
- Do not assume they are someone else's responsibility.
- Do place importance on early childhood proactive strategies that promote emotional intelligence.

In shifting the focus away from individual disruptive children and troubled youth to the contexts in which their lives are embedded, [*Being Proactive I*](#) presenters and participants in 2012 explored the linkages of race and poverty, trauma and violence, education, mental health and the criminal justice system. Dr. Kwame McKenzie noted that the biggest problem with developing robust mental health in racialized youth is the constant daily trauma of discrimination which he described as “socially inflicted trauma” leading to and exacerbating economic and social inequality. He suggested that if we want to challenge racism, we must build a better future for people in general and for youth in particular. In this regard, psychologists Sarah Yanosy and Landa Harrison of U.S. Sanctuary Institute suggested that the central question that should be put in our examination of disruptive children and youth in trouble with the law, is “What happened to you?” rather than “What’s wrong with you?”

In 2013, [*Being Proactive II*](#) presenters and participants sharpened the focus on mental health for improved youth outcomes. While addressing the socio-cultural determinants of mental health, they identified a range of creative interventions to re-engage children and youth who have experienced disengagement and disconnection from their schools and communities. Dr. McKenzie made the case for Canada’s need to foster and protect “mental capital” – a term that comprises both Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and Emotional Quotient (EQ), recognizing the importance of social capital and mental health. He notes that EQ is often a better predictor of future success. Perhaps because the challenges are so complicated and daunting, the resiliency research introduced by Dr. Michael Unger suggested ways to bolster mental capital and struck a powerfully resonant chord as important for a proactive stance.

The resounding theme of all three conferences was that the mental health of marginalized and racialized youth is compromised very early in life by racism, violence, poverty, street involvement of young people in conflict with the law and other related institutional and systematic factors and that the damage cannot be easily undone. While the hard work is just beginning, and cross-sectoral partnerships are as necessary as they are complex, a model for action also emerged, based on four foci:

- Address the social-political context of violence, racialization, trauma, children and youth mental health and the education and justice systems.
- Reach out to create partnerships across education, mental health and the justice system.
- Support community-driven initiatives for healing and re-engagement.
- Develop and implement asset-based approaches to build from strengths.

Recommendations, targeted to (1) education/schooling, (2) mental health support, and (3) the criminal justice system, are identified at the end of the report to guide proactive work in these three core areas.

Overview

This report offers a summary of three York University conferences designed by the York Centre for Education and Community and its partners to explore a range of issues – pertaining to such things as poor mental health, academic underachievement, and gang involvement, which are affecting disproportionate numbers of children and youth in marginalized and racialized communities.

In Part One, the report identifies the *Review of Roots of Youth Violence* as Ontario’s call to action to address the social political context of the youth violence problem. The report then offers a synopsis of the conferences as a response to this provincial warning, exploring “the roots” – poverty, racism, violence, hopelessness and undiagnosed mental health issues – from a social justice perspective. While acknowledging that complex and inter-related themes criss-cross the presentations and discussions of each event, this report focuses on a major articulation or emphasis for each. It suggests, for example:

- The first forum, [*Crossing Paradigms*](#), *March 18, 2011*, articulated a vision for proactive work.
- The second forum, [*Being Proactive I*](#), *February 16–17, 2012*, reframed the contextual question to “What happened to you?” from “What’s wrong with you?”
- The third forum, [*Being Proactive II*](#), *March 22, 2013*, sharpened the focus on bolstering the mental health of children and youth growing up in marginalized and racialized communities.

In the report’s Part Two, a model for action is presented, culling from presentations and discussions, four large themes – (1) the need to address the social political context of youth violence, (2) the importance of continuing to build partnerships across education, mental health

and the justice system to problem-solve and respond, (3) the significance of support for community-driven initiatives to build community agency, (that is, capacity and empowerment originating from the community itself to identify, determine and bring about desired change) and (4) regardless of the diversity of the programs and approaches, always build from individual and community strengths.

Part Three of the report captures, recommendations, from presentations and discussions from all three conferences, for further reflection, discussion and action. These might serve to engage, re-engage and heal at-risk children and youth.

It is important to note that this report is based on three larger reports, prepared separately for each conference, and all available online:

- [*Crossing Paradigms \(2011\) – Youth, Mental Health and the Justice System: An Educational Concern Discussion Forum Report*](#)
- [*Being Proactive I \(2012\): Supporting Children and Youth Mental Health and Wellness in Schools and Communities Conference Report*](#)
- [*Being Proactive II \(2013\): Looking after the Mental Health and Well-Being of Children and Youth in our Communities Conference Report*](#)