

2008

Rooted in Action:

A Youth-Led Report on our Demands and Plans to Address
The Root Causes of Violence in Our Communities



The reality of youth violence is one that does not only affect the 13 neighbourhoods identified by the city of Toronto as dangerous or "at risk". Many of us have come to the realization from our work and relationships with our communities, that youth becoming "at risk" comes from a society who puts others "at risk" from being able to participate as equal members. We invite all our youth allies and community members to begin to strategize how we can work collectively to build community power to bring about tangible change.

Grassroots Youth Collaborative

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with the support of youth and staff of the
Grassroots Youth Collaborative

The Grassroots Youth Collaborative

The Grassroots Youth Collaborative (GYC) was formed in May 2004 to advocate for policies that empower young people to have a voice and contribute to their communities. We are a collective of culturally and racially diverse youth-led organizations that work in underserved, lower-income, racialized and marginalized communities where violence, especially youth violence, is regularly in the media spotlight. The programs delivered by our members reach out and engage young people who are typically missed by more mainstream youth programming.

As of the date of publication, the GYC consists of eleven member organizations including: 4Unity Media Arts Association (4Unity), Beatz to Da Streetz, Canadian-Tamil Youth Development Centre (CANTYD), For Youth Initiative (FYI), Phase 1 Step Team, Rathburn Area Youth (RAY), Regent Park Focus, The REMIX Project, Schools Without Borders (SWB), the Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT) and the Young Diplomats Ethiopian Youth Development Group.

The Grassroots Youth Collaborative is not only committed to building the capacity of young people in the city of Toronto but to developing solutions to problems/barriers in our communities as well. The GYC emerged in 2004 out of a social context where youth-led organizations were struggling to maintain services and programs in a climate of close to a decade of severe cuts to funding for social service agencies. While many of the large mainstream organizations were affected by these cuts and became more reliant on project funding rather than core funding, grassroots youth-led organizations were hit harder and many are tethering on the brink of extinction.

The GYC thus originally came together in an effort to break the isolation and social/cultural/political barriers that were preventing young people from taking control of their own communities and lives. The GYC focuses on three broad fields of work: (1) Resource Sharing and Capacity Building for Youth-Led Organizations in the City of Toronto; (2) Fundraising for Youth-Led Organization in the City of Toronto; and (3) Advocacy, Research and Action in Addressing Social Issues facing youth in our communities.

From the Roots Up!

In March 2006, the GYC held a two-day forum entitled, “From the Roots Up! A Youth-Led Forum on Building Safe & Healthy Communities”, which brought out 250 youth from the racialized and marginalized communities that we work and live in to discuss tangible and concrete policy demands to improve the quality of life in our communities. This forum led to both a report and documentary that outlined the root issues facing youth in the GTA and the responses and policy recommendations that they put forward to all levels of government.

Some key recommendations that came out of this process and report include:

- *Coordination among all levels of government (Federal, Provincial, Municipal) to work with communities and implement long-term sustainable programs that address the root causes of violence in our communities (i.e. poverty, racism, lack of meaningful employment opportunities, Indigenous rights, migrant rights, etc.)*
- *Focus away from policing and law-enforcement and towards holistic community-based policies that help to build communities*
- *More meaningful government job opportunities for youth to help them to build and support their communities*
- *Re-writing of Ontario High School Curriculum that moves away from Eurocentric worldviews and encapsulates the stories, histories and resistance of Indigenous, African, Asian and South American/Caribbean peoples in Canada*
- *Repeal of Safe Schools and Safe Streets Act, which both target and criminalize poor youth, Indigenous youth and youth of colour in the schools and on the streets.*
- *An immediate halting of funding/construction of the “Toronto Youth Centre” set to open in Brampton, Ontario– with a focus away from incarceration and as a step in that direction towards small, open-custody and diversion programs as suggested in the Meffe Report.*

These recommendations were presented to a delegation of 50 representatives of different levels of government on April 3rd 2006. Since that time, the GYC has continued to work towards the implementation of all the recommendations in this report.

The Ontario Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat

In June 2007 a discussion began between the Grassroots Youth Collaborative and staff members of the Ontario Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat around how the two parties could collaborate in compiling research and putting forward the perspectives of the GYC membership and participants in a meaningful way that addressed root issues of violence in our communities.

Weary of the lack of action that had occurred following the “From the Roots Up!” process in 2006, many GYC members were apprehensive about once again engaging in a research process that was consultative but not action-oriented in the best interests of the community. In discussions among the GYC membership cited numerous examples of government inaction on commissioned reports (i.e. The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples; the 2006 Meffe Inquest Report) and wanted to ensure that any work dedicated to supporting the Ontario Roots of Youth Violence process (and the ensuing

McMurtry-Curling Report) would have positive action-oriented implications and impacts in our communities.

After serious discussion and assurances by the staff at the Secretariat that the co-chairs Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling were serious about their commitment to addressing the social issues that impact our communities, the GYC agreed to put forward a proposal to the Secretariat that would enable us to conduct research, mobilize community members and put forward a clear plan of action to the Government of Ontario on addressing the serious social issues facing our communities.

There were three main components to the project accepted by the Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat in November 2007:

1) Documenting the Experience

- a. Scan what has been published and released on underlying causes contributing to youth violence by youth-led organizations
- b. Collaborating with concurrent research projects

2) Community Educationals of Barriers & Solutions

- a. A process that ensures that GYC groups work across communities and neighbourhoods to contribute a thick analysis of issues that are at the root of violence in our communities and tangible solutions being put forward by young people to address them.
- b. Get feedback that gauges the accuracy and relevance of our data collection and local/international research
- c. Explore who is saying what in terms of “what the roots of violence are” and begin to map proposed solutions

3) Develop Recommendations

- a. Develop recommendations that flow from the research in the following areas:
 - i. Youth-led strategies for building safe & healthy communities
 - ii. Supporting youth-led initiatives and community-based work
 - iii. Creating structural changes that will improve the conditions that impact violence in our communities
- b. Recommendations will be presented with respect to perspectives of diverse youth in the City of Toronto Recommendations will provide immediate, mid and long-term strategies and simple evaluative measures to ensure this project is action-oriented

The Research Process

Following the submission of the proposal, the GYC had the opportunity to meet with Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling, the co-chairs of this research study, to discuss the research and to push for a process that is inclusive, transparent and serious about action.

In the meeting with the co-chairs, Roy McMurtry emphasized that the *process* of how this research was conducted would be the “legacy” of this work. In other words, Mr. McMurtry noted that the means to which we begin to address the issues at the root of violence in our communities is as important as the goals that we seek to achieve. The GYC has consistently placed an emphasis on “process” in our work in communities and we are encouraged by Mr. McMurtry’s acknowledgement of its importance.

The following section will identify some key issues of process that the GYC identified as important to conducting research with racialized and marginalized youth and our experiences as part of the Ontario Roots of Youth Violence study. This section is meant to contribute important reflections with respect to our experiences as staff and participants in youth-led organizations within this study. In the interest of truly making the legacy of this research the “process” itself, we must highlight the importance of creating an open and public discourse and a culture of respect in collaboration between directly affected communities and government research studies in developing and implementing social policy legislation.

Timelines & Context

The work of the Ontario Roots of Youth Violence research must be understood within the context of the social and political climate in which it emerged. Following the shooting death of Jordan Manners in the spring of 2007, the Ontario government and the Federal government proceeded to implement reactionary policies that sought to address a perceived “increase in violent crimes” among youth in the city of Toronto through a “tough on crime” agenda. Actions taken by the provincial and federal government prior to the publishing of this report include:

- July 27th 2007, Premier McGuinty announces \$26 Million dollars and the hiring of 200 new police officers to “fight gun crimes”
- December 6th, 2007, Premier McGuinty announces a \$51 million “guns & gangs” strategy that proposes to step up enforcement of the “guns & gangs problems” in the city of Toronto.
- The continuation of the building and construction of the \$100+ Million “Roy McMurtry” youth Superjail in conflict with the recommendations of the 2006 Meffe Inquest Report

Most recently the Federal Conservative government has passed Bill C-2, what they term as the “violent crimes act” which will impose stronger bail conditions, minimum jail sentences for young offenders, harsher sentences for gun related crimes, drunk driving, etc. This omnibus bill passed with little to no public debate and no year-long research studies that could prove the effectiveness of such measures (measures that have become antiquated and discredited in many U.S. states).

To counterbalance this “tough on crime” agenda Ontario Premier, Dalton McGuinty sought to conduct research on policies that would target the root issues of youth violence through the creation of the \$15 Million “Youth Challenge Fund” (terminal after 3 years

of existence) and the creation of the Ontario Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat that would seek to research “root causes of youth violence” in Ontario communities.

These “root causes” (i.e. poverty, displacement, racism, racial profiling, Eurocentric education curriculae, lack of affordable housing, lack of meaningful employment or opportunities), and other such root causes identified for decades by social justice advocates, community members and grassroots organizations have been largely ignored or exacerbated by government policies (particularly since the Mike Harris era) and have not been addressed with the urgency in which the government sought to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in the Prison Industrial Complex.

Thus, a comprehensive plan of action on addressing these root issues should be inclusive of the multitudes of research, reports and studies that have been released by grassroots organizations over the last decade. With limited resources and time constraints, these small community-based organizations have made hundreds of important and timely contributions to addressing issues that impact the wellbeing of their communities with little to no interest from most government agencies. Moreover, there has been even less coordinated and comprehensive implementation strategies organized among all three levels of government to address some of the most critical social issues underlying the roots of violence in our communities.

The timeline to complete the work requested of the Ontario Roots of Youth Violence committee was 1 year. However, the time given to the GYC (following the signing of the contract) was less than 12 weeks and while our collaborative felt that it was important to contribute to this research initiative, time constraints significantly impacted the breadth and inclusiveness of both the process and the research. The GYC would have liked to have been given more time to undertake this research and to have input on matters of policy not just during a reactionary political period, but *throughout long-term social policy planning initiatives*.

Transparency and Trust

The GYC is a strong advocate for transparency and openness within community consultation and research processes. We feel that too often governments have tended to obfuscate, bureaucratize and drive research to ensure that the results reflect the political ideology of the government in power. This lack of transparency can manifest in many tangible ways and includes:

- Lateness in advising communities about a research initiative that impacts them directly
- The hiring of civil servants to complete the research with little or no community experience with those people directly impacted by the study
- Lack of full disclosure of information that would be considered important or relevant to the communities who are participating in the research process
- Strong focus on contractual obligations and bureaucracy and little focus on the urgency and social realities of communities that are undertaking the research

- Under-resourcing communities or contracting of “research experts” rather than those directly impacted by the issues being researched in the study

The Ontario Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat attempted to address some of these issues of transparency and trust in our initial meetings. They sought to contact the GYC early in the process and stayed in fairly consistent communication with our staff and membership throughout the process. The secretariat also sought to fund the GYC research contribution to the McMurtry-Curling Report. The work of staff to get an in-depth understanding of the issues facing the communities they were seeking to research should not be overlooked in the face of significant time constraints and a lack of funding to conduct a comprehensive study that would truly encompass issues impacting youth in Ontario more broadly.

While this work by secretariat staff helped to build a working relationship with the GYC, there were obvious issues of transparency and trust that were breached by the McMurtry-Curling research that had a direct impact on our ability as a collaborative to conduct meaningful research and trust that our work and the words of our program participants would be taken seriously by the government and by the co-chairs who were presenting this research.

First and foremost was our view that of one of the co-chairs of this study, former Chief Justice of Ontario Roy McMurtry, lacked impartiality since he gave the Government of Ontario permission in July 2007 to name the youth super jail under construction in Brampton, Ontario after him. The building of the “Roy McMurtry Youth Centre”, a 192-bed secure custody facility for youth prisoners, contradicts the recommendations of the Meffe Report, which resulted in the closing of the Toronto Youth Assessment Centre (TYAC) after the suicide death of David Meffe in 2002. What concerns the GYC most about this link between the construction of the youth super jail and Chief Justice McMurtry is that it directly contradicts a clear recommendation in the Meffe Report, giving us cause to worry about whether or not recommendations brought into this research process would be disregarded in the same way.

Second, while staff at the secretariat were genuinely concerned and interested in seeking the ideas and experiences of racialized and marginalized youth in the study, there was a lack of long-term trusting relationships that they had built within the communities that they sought to conduct research. The process required to make tangible long-term change in our communities, must include a long-term commitment from government staff to support and work with communities to identify issues they face on a consistent basis.

Clear Mandate, Collaboration and Action

Historically youth-led organizations have seen little action dedicated to the implementation of recommendations and policy initiatives brought forward by community members. While there has been no shortage of consultations and forums and research, there has been little action by governments (federal, provincial or municipal)

that present a clear mandate and a strong commitment to work with communities to implement policy that would have a positive and long-term impact.

This lack of action is juxtaposed to the reactionary and swift actions that often follow a public shooting or a crime involving youth of colour. Specifically, the increasing budgets for police forces, the creation of the “guns and gangs” task forces and the construction of the Roy McMurtry Youth Superjail were all implemented without broad community consultation, supporting research or (in the case of the Superjail) in contradiction to existing research and recommendations coming from a public inquiry. **The volatile and contradictory nature of youth justice legislation has led to a lack of community trust that government will act to implement long-term sustainable policy directives that would help to address some of the most crippling root social issues facing racialized and marginalized communities in the Province of Ontario.**

This report and the resulting documentaries and community action forums that resulted from the research process, seek to directly challenge the Government of Ontario and all political parties in Ontario to adopt policy legislation that is long-term, sustainable and community-driven. We are also writing this report directly to fellow members of our communities as a call to action to ensure the implementation of these policy demands happens promptly, effectively and with participation from our communities.

Alternative Thoughts, Alternative Action '08 and Beyond

This 'report' on the roots of the violence that youth face is far from a report in the conventional sense. GYC was invited to partake in this review to get a perspective on these issues that came straight from the youth in our communities. However, we decided to opt out of the well-used method of organizing youth focus groups and distilling these voices into a report, as we felt this would be both an irresponsible and unethical approach at this stage. Almost all of the individual organizations within the GYC, as well as the collaborative itself (see *Youth on Youth* and *From the Roots Up!*), have initiated or received funding to commission similar reports before. To return to these same youth and ask that they reiterate their experiences and frustrations without the implementation of the recommendations that stemmed from previous reports would betray our community-oriented philosophy. Feminist methodological literature that drives many of our organization's practice has identified similar ethical concerns in its critique of Western research in the Global South, which has been described as "'pillaging of raw data for export' akin to colonial powers' exploitation of the Third World's material resources" (Miraftab, 2004: 596)

This document has brought together excerpts from previous reports from grassroots youth organizations whose content and recommendations are just as relevant in today's context as they were when they were written. We have also included notes from "Strategizing Minds: Alternative Thoughts, Alternative Action '08 and Beyond". This event was held on January 26th, 2008 as part of this review in order to bring together youth organizers from marginalized and racialized communities in Toronto for a day of collaboration and strategizing. Structuring this forum as a strategizing meeting rather than a focus group was part of our attempt at making this *process* just as important as the *outcome*. The event brought together a number of young people from a wide variety of organizations, all of whom are amazing social entrepreneurs and community organizers who have identified and begun to address the roots of the violence that youth face long before this report was commissioned. The result was an important meeting that yielded great strategies for how our communities can continue to tackle the issues that directly impact violence and oppression in our communities, and how the different levels of government must join in this effort by addressing the policies identified as hindering this process.

Fresh Voices

"I am often amazed at the passion, tenacity and professionalism displayed by my peers. The greatest revolutions were driven by young people and I believe the only thing necessary in order to see the same type of widespread change in our communities is a conscious process of political education – where young people begin to see their private issues as public ones and shift their gaze from their immediate surroundings to the communities that they belong to"

*Alpha Abebe, Young Diplomats
Strategizing Minds Participant*

Through our community work and contact, we identified four general categories of issues that contribute to the violence affecting our communities in the city of Toronto. While these categories are not comprehensive, they attest to the experiences and realities facing youth participants, the staff of GYC member organizations and our peers in the city with respect to four broad categories. These categories are: 1) Education; 2) Criminalization; 3) Economics and Opportunity; and 4) Space. The breakout sessions at the *Strategizing Minds* forum were organized around these categories, just as the subsequent sections of this document are. Each section begins with “Strategizing Minds” – relevant quotes taken directly from the forum that speak to each respective issue. The sections will discuss how each issue is a core contributor to the violence youth face in Toronto and will outline specific policies or lack of action that serve to perpetuate the problem. As a collaborative of motivated, capable youth organizers we feel it is important that grievances always be met with a plan of action, thus we have included examples of how communities have already begun to organize around these issues both in the report as well as in the *Grassroots Action* sections. Additionally, this report will end with a set of *demands* that we challenge the Government of Ontario to implement in a timely and effective manner and to show their seriousness to act on the work of the study they commissioned one year ago.

e d u c a t i o n

STRATEGIZING MINDS

“The education that we all have has taught us to think in bubbles – like Black History Month. The history of African people is *also* North American and South American history!”

[Strategizing Minds Participant, 2008]

Brazilian theorist, Paulo Freire wrote in his 1970 book, *the Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that, “[e]ducation either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Freire, 1970). The Ontario curriculum has long been an instrument to suppress and dismiss the contributions and work of marginalized and racialized communities. A history of racism, Residential Schools and a Eurocentric curriculum continues to permeate today’s more “multicultural” education system.

The idea that education is a path to empowerment is not a new one. Throughout history, around the globe, people have always demanded access to education as a means of asserting their civil rights and denying such access has often been used as a tool of subjugation and oppression. Regardless of the initial purpose or scope, almost all of the studies previously done by the various members and allies of GYC have identified some

issues relating to education as a critical part to addressing some of the root causes of violence and oppression in our communities.

In 2003, For Youth Initiative (FYI) published a report entitled *Exploring Empowering Education for Marginalized Youth in Toronto* after receiving funding from the Federal Department of Justice's National Crime Prevention Strategy Program. FYI is a youth-led GYC member organization that uses popular culture to bring critical theory and social systemic change to the streets of the former City of York, North Etobicoke and West Toronto. As an organization that attempts to provide capacity building opportunities to youth through education, training and other forms of engagement, the findings from their study are particularly relevant to this report. Further, considering that the National Crime Prevention Strategy Program, the principle funder of FYI's study, has a mandate to approach crime prevention through a focus on the *root causes of crime*, the findings and recommendations put forward by FYI should be seriously considered in the McMurtry/Curling review and will be briefly discussed below.

[To obtain a full copy of FYI's report, please contact fyi@foryouth.ca]

FYI's report is premised on two important assertions: 1) that inequalities are a reality in the existing education system, particularly for Black and Indigenous youth, suggesting a need for more relevant and engaging forms of education, and; 2) that alternative education has the potential to act as a liberating and positive force in the lives of marginalized young people. Their report includes a critical literature review as well as the results of their qualitative study, which included five focus groups and fifteen in-depth interviews with educators and youth from various backgrounds in Toronto. Their findings relating to discrimination and racism within the education system were not particularly surprising, and the report itself states: "Over and over again, students are saying that they feel discriminated against in schools, by teachers and other students. This study was no different, as almost all of the participants described experiences with and perceptions of racism in schools" (FYI, 2003: 13-14). These sentiments were most poignant when expressed by youth who had prematurely left the education system at the time of the study.

Fresh Voices

"The United Way report 'Poverty by Postal Code' named 13 neighbourhoods in Toronto as priorities of special focus - when we look at the areas named - when we step into these geographical spaces - we realize that poverty can be tracked not only by postal code but also by a particular racial constituency. So....alienation coupled with financial inaccessibility make universities a distant possibility for many. There is little belief that university is a space they are entitled to, a space where they belong - why should they? Why should we? Rising costs - the message is clear; this place is not for us. Colonial education from kindergarten to grade 12 - the message is clear; this place is not for us."

***Amanda Parris, Co-Founder of Lost Lyrics
Strategizing Minds Participant***

In the super industrialized service economy of Canada, it is well known that access to the job market is highly regulated by the mainstream educational system. The core issues in education relating to the violence that youth face are access to education, discrimination within the educational system, a Eurocentric and colonial curriculum, and limited alternative educational strategies and programs. Most of the young people implicated in youth violence have had encounters with, or are still within the Canadian educational system. The policies, curricula and attitudes that shape these experiences have a lot to do with why many of these youth are either unsuccessful or no longer within this system. While it has become common knowledge that those who are pushed out or drop out of high school are vulnerable to economic and social insecurity and that this can often lead them into situations of violence, there has been a shortage of critical assessments of all the institutions implicated in this situation.

For example, in 2004 The Learning Partnership, a national organization that conducts research and develops policy alternatives for the Canadian education system, came out with a report entitled *The Quality of Public Education in Canada: Students At Risk*. This report used data from the Child Poverty Rate, The Dropout Rate, and the Vulnerability Index to assess what they saw as the key factors that put students ‘at risk’ of being unsuccessful. They listed the four key factors as poverty; a child’s natural development; parental influence and; the neighbourhood (See Levin & Peacock, 2004). Here we see an example of a common unwillingness to challenge the educational system head on in order to hold it responsible for the ways in which it creates the environment of insecurity invoked by its own discourse of ‘risk’.

For the purposes of this report, we felt it necessary to contextualize the various issues with the respective policies, programs and institutions that relate to them. This is an overt attempt at avoiding the possibility that these issues are seen as philosophical ones, but rather, that we contribute to a widespread political education that would enable young people to see their private issues in very public ways. A lot of the disillusionment that young people express towards school has to do with their inability to relate to the material taught. In their report, FYI refers to the document *Removing the Margins: The Challenges and Possibilities of Inclusive Schooling* from the Canadian Scholars’ Press, which states that “understanding curriculum as the ‘whole environment’ and culture within which schooling takes place, means that representation in education is achieved through creating a sense of *presence* for all students in school” (FYI, 2003: 9). Thus, it is not so much a matter of building more “inclusion” in the education system (i.e. trying to add more cultures to a primarily white, Eurocentric male-dominated curriculum), but rather it requires the

Fresh Voices

“If you are disconnected from something how can you then be engaged in it, when you are learning about something that is other than you? [...] These students don’t see themselves, but yet they know that they are there”

***Ian Kamau, Schools Without Borders
Strategizing Minds Participant***

“re-centering” of curriculum within a model that values the histories and struggles of Indigenous people, racialized communities, women, queer communities, disabled communities and other poor and/or marginalized communities.

While, Black history month is a wonderful opportunity to celebrate and remember the contributions and struggles of Black people in North America, there has been no serious attempt at making the entire Ontario curriculum representative of and valuing the histories and knowledges of Indigenous, poor, racialized and marginalized communities in Canada that reflects and values the students in our schools. As one contributor at the *Strategizing Minds* forum expressed, “we are not the only ones that need to learn our history, but white people need to learn about it too because they are also implicated in it”.

Ian Kamau, another participant of *Strategizing Minds* added to this:

Our entire education system is built on a European structure, with European ideas and a European concept. And that wouldn't even be ok if was only European's or people of European descent sitting in those classes. It is made even worse given the fact that our schools are so diverse and there are people from different cultures, religions, geographical locations, and economic settings. It should be a natural thing that the full reality of the world would be taught *as history* – but not just history, also things that happen in a contemporary context so kids have an education where they learn about the whole world not just one part of the world – **I don't think that is unreasonable** [...] When they do talk about Black history they just speak about slavery, which is only a particular part of the black experience for a specific group of Black people. Or when they teach about the First Nations they only talk about residential schools – but there are so many other major experiences and contexts that we don't spend more than a day or page in the curriculum on.


Ian Kamau as well as many other contributors at the *Strategizing Minds* forum explained how these issues with the curriculum have deep seeded implications and are well overdue for serious consideration.

In 2006, the GYC received funding from Justice Canada to organize a forum on building safe and healthy communities entitled *From the Roots Up!* One of the recommendations from the report back was that the Ministry of Education of Ontario revamp the current Ontario high school/grade school curriculum. This came out of concerns with the current curriculum as expressed by the youth at the forum, one who stated “...it makes you think...why is it that we receive eleven months of European history...no months of Indigenous history and only one month of the histories of the many people who helped to build this country?...” (GYC, 2006: 12) Even with more recent prospects of building a black-focused school in Toronto, the issue of a Eurocentric and colonial curriculum remains at the forefront of preventing education from being more relevant, accessible, honest and empowering to all youth in Canada. However, discrimination in the school system is not confined to curriculum. Marginalized youth are encountering barriers to education through educational policies such as differential streaming and the Safe Schools Act.

Streaming has increasingly become an issue in limiting the opportunities for higher education among racialized and marginalized youth. FYI's report cites a study

released by the Coalition of Visible Minority Women that reveals that “often times Black students and parents have found that teachers and guidance counsellors have expected less from Black students, and have encouraged them to take non-academic courses or focus on sports, suggesting that ‘the student did not have the ability to go very far’” (FYI, 2003: 34). This finding is validated by many of the experiences of youth in GYC member organizations. For example, the outreach workers from Young Diplomats, a youth-led organization that runs a mentorship program for Ethiopian youth in Toronto, often have to do “damage control” and intensive mentoring with youth in their community who have been discouraged by educators to proceed in the education system.

The Safe Schools Act (SSA) is another policy that has been the target of criticism from youth, parents, community workers and even educators since its introduction in 2000. This criticism stems from the fact that the SSA sets the terms for *mandatory* expulsion and suspension and the widespread evidence showing that it is predominantly Black and Aboriginal youth who suffer the brunt of this policy. While many amendments have been made to the Act since 2000, the most recent being the changes taken effect on February 1, 2008, policy makers have ignored the call to repeal the whole Act and put provisions in place “to actually make schools safer places” (GYC, 2006: 22). At a Scarborough community forum organized to discuss the recent revisions to the SSA, a lawyer from the African Canadian Legal Clinic urged the group not to be too quick to celebrate the changes made to the SSA. She reminded everyone that the Act was not simply changed because the school board felt it needed to be – the Act was changed because black students and their parents were filing human rights complaints against the school board. She explained that many times, a student’s reaction that subsequently warranted disciplinary action was actually the result of low teacher expectation and racial harassment in the school. Further, the overall language of the SSA is very much the stereotype of ‘the troublemaker’, which is highly racialized. In an attempt to correct discriminatory policy, and ultimately to get at the roots of the violence that youth face, policy makers must stop making surface changes to policies that are inherently damaging like the SSA.



Grassroots Action

Lost Lyrics is an alternative education after school program that uses Hip Hop culture as a way of defining who we are and expressing a knowledge of self. This 8 month program provides an encouraging atmosphere using relevant mentors and facilitators who work with youth ages 11-14 in the Jane/Finch and Malvern neighbourhoods. The goal of Lost Lyrics is to get youth to critically analyze the world around them and utilize this new lens through creative arts such as rhyming, film, photography, beats production and more.

c r i m i n a l i z a t i o n

STRATEGIZING MINDS

*The thing on my head don't mean a damn thang
People think a do-rag means you gang bang
And it's kind of funny how y'all stare
When really I'm just a kid who wants waves in his hair.*

[“Do-Rag” was performed at the forum by local artist TWest – also a social entrepreneur from Lawrence Heights/Jungle]

Rather than discuss *criminality* with regards to youth violence, which would suggest that the root cause is within the youth him/herself, we have chosen to discuss *criminalization* instead. The culture of criminalization is one that implicates not only the criminal justice system, but every other institution that structures our society as well. Criminalization is the manifestation of prejudice, fear and oppression and shapes the way certain people are monitored and subsequently treated. In some senses, criminalization does not belong in a report about the roots of youth violence, as it often is a precursor that sets the terms for *what* is viewed as violence and *who is chosen to be seen* as perpetrating this violence. That being said, we felt it critical to bring this issue to the fore in our report in an attempt to challenge policy makers to recognize how young people are being marginalized in very real and damaging ways.

From: *Strategizing Minds: Alternative Thought, Alternative Action*

What is Criminalization?

Policing focused on existing biases and prejudices

- There are no less drugs in some high schools than others, however, certain schools are perceived as having more or being more problematic

Negative police focus

- Who gets arrested/targeted is affected by greater police presence in certain neighbourhoods

Classism influencing judgement of justice

- An **‘industry of criminalization’**: The response towards ‘summer/year of the gun’ was \$55 million towards a policing task force, \$100 million towards a youth super jail, and only \$15 million towards youth programme funding

The issues raised by the **criminalization** working group at the *Strategizing Minds* forum were quite varied. The contributors found it difficult to discuss criminalization without discussing opportunity – and found it hard to discuss opportunity without

outlining the lack thereof. In describing the barriers and challenges relating to criminalization, examples ranged from housing to employment, racism, homophobia/heterosexism, political agendas, wrongful spending, policing culture, criminalizing legislation, and hypocrisy. One of the contributors described the problem broadly as “political and economic structures that keep certain people in positions so they may stay in power, and creates barriers for others to influence or gain power”. There was an overall consensus that certain groups, neighbourhoods and schools were the target of exclusionary and criminalizing practices. However, there was also the acknowledgment that part of criminalization is the social contexts which push young people into anti-social and violent situations that subsequently lead them to encounters with disciplinary institutions. The reality is that young people are growing up in environments that are structured by barriers to accessing conventional means of economic and social sustenance. There seems to be unwillingness however, to look at the institutions that contribute to such environments, and a preference to criminalize those who must live in these environments instead. GYC has previously raised concerns over certain terminology, like ‘at-risk youth’ and ‘youth violence’ that demonstrate the tendency to locate the problem in the individual, rather than the context. [See *Youth on Youth: Grassroots Youth Collaborative on Youth Led Organizing in the City of Toronto* for discussion]

Fresh Voices

GYC: *Youth on Youth* (2005: 25)

“My problem is with the basic assumption implied by at-risk...in terms of narrowing it down. I personally think that there are a lot of institutional barriers that prevent young people in general from participating fully in society. This whole category of at-risk is a way of not facing those barriers... not facing barriers of institutional racism, not facing barrier of poverty, not facing barriers relating to housing ... those are the real issues. The at-risk terminology hides those issues because they say, we can’t face these systemic barriers, we only want to focus on programming to those youth in the community who are unable to cope with the barriers that we put up – youth who react to those barriers in ways that are destructive to themselves and to others”.

Adonis Huggins, Regent Park Focus

Scot Wortley, a leading criminologist at the University of Toronto, has been at the forefront of exposing the racialized practices of criminal justice workers in Canada. His work has also shown that this does not stem from some conspiracy within the system, but rather, is a reflection of deep seeded prejudices that run through the whole fabric of our society. On October 19, 2002, the Toronto Star began publishing a series of articles on race and crime, whereby their analysis revealed that blacks in Toronto are highly overrepresented in certain charge categories and that this is consistent with the allegation that Toronto police engage in racial profiling. Their rather modest account of the issue

has been substantiated by a wealth of evidence both in the academic sphere by scholars like Scot Wortley, and by grassroots accounts as well. In response to the Toronto Star series, the Toronto police led a campaign of denial spearheaded by the then-Toronto police Chief Fantino who declared "[w]e do not do racial profiling ... There is no racism ... We don't look at, nor do we consider race or ethnicity, or any of that, as factors of how we dispose of cases, or individuals, or how we treat individuals" (Wortley & Tanner, 2003: 368). Canadian criminologists have published numerous accounts that demonstrate otherwise, including quantitative analyses of diversion, charge, and sentencing data as well as qualitative accounts from hundreds of diverse Toronto youth whose personal experiences with the police speak volumes against Fantino's claim (e.g.

Fresh Voices

RPTV: Police and Youth Relations Part II

"...usually it's the big guys that come in and they try and harass you and stuff – they try and bully you, you know, make you look stupid. That's the thing I don't like about them you know."

Regent Park youth resident

"...you know some police they're alright you know, but other police, they like harassing you and stuff. Basically in Regent Park they do that a lot, you know."

Regent Park youth resident

Fresh Voices

RPTV: Police and Youth Relations Part III

"I was double-riding, I was pulled over by two police officers. They stopped us, they explained that double-riding is illegal so then they began to search us. So I started to get angry, I was like 'I don't see what double-riding and searching have to do with each other, cause it doesn't go together. Can you just write me ticket and let me go?' So they didn't really listen to me, they started yelling ... 'we're the guys, we know the rules, we know the law, you don't know anything so shut up.' They had us face down forward in the middle of the street."

Regent Park youth resident

Ruck & Wortley, 2002; Wortley & Tanner, 2003; Tator, 2006; Wortley, 2006)

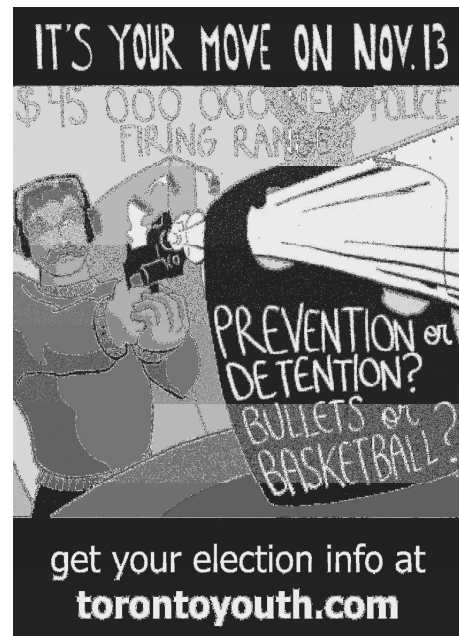
The Neglected is a song that was written by two budding young rap artists from Toronto, Abel Shimeles and Rosie Marfo. This song was written and recorded specifically for GYC's documentary on the roots of youth violence as part of this project. The powerful lyrics of this song demonstrate that young Canadians are very conscious of the institutional forms of racism and criminalization in their communities, despite the fact that many of the authority figures in these very institutions refuse to recognize it themselves. The following lyrics from the second verse in *The Neglected* speak to the ways in which Black youth are stereotyped, how these perceptions stifle their ambitions and dreams, and how these young people often find ways to be resilient nonetheless. ***I'm the neglected, constantly tested. The government he want me arrested, society's minds are infected. By the bullshit that is taught through institutions that me and u invest in [...] Too many blacks living in a stereotype. That was put on them from the beginning constantly sinning. For what, corruption within our own***

race. Like a race with no prize to chase it doesn't make sense. Hence why I spit bout this. I see through system like lens on the other side of the fence. When expression is answered with neglecting. It usually leads to violent ways to show aggression. Anger builds with depression. But God's been there for me with protection. That's why I count all my blessings.

Regent Park Focus Youth Media Arts Centre, is a non-for-profit GYC member organization that is youth driven and committed to exploring issues and developing resources that sustain healthy communities and address systemic barriers to equitable social participation. This centre was established in 1989 and has been an innovative leader in engaging youth through youth-led media productions. Regent Park TV (RPTV) is an internet broadcast station run by the youth at the centre that airs interviews, debates, short dramas, documentaries, news shows, public service announcements (PSAs) and Super8 films – all that provide a forum for local youth to voice their experiences, share their stories and explore issues that affect them and their community.

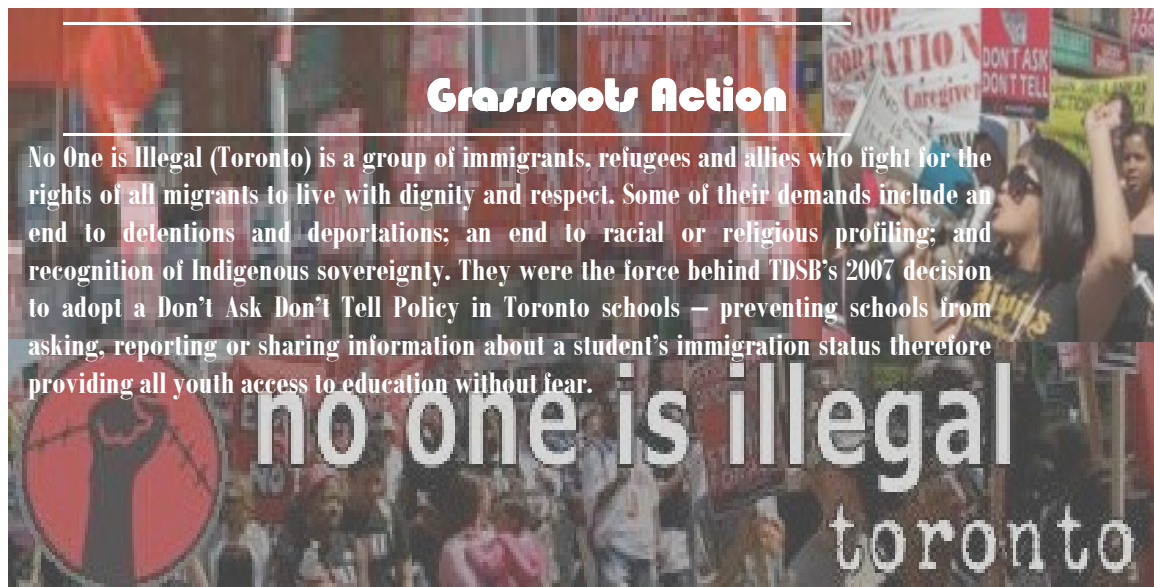
[Please visit www.regentpark.tv or <http://www.catchdaflava.com> for more information].

RPTV ran a youth directed three part PSA series on *Police and Youth Relations* where youth explored issues of racial profiling, police harassment and police corruption through interviews, personal narrative and drama. The short videos (found in the website's archives) included young people's real life negative experiences with Toronto police but also included some very innovative solutions to the problem that came from the youth themselves. In response to the problem that youth have with police harassing them in their neighbourhoods, one PSA suggested that "during their patrols police should build better relations with young people by informing them about job opportunities, programs and services" (RPTV: Police and Youth Relations Part II). Another PSA suggested that "the government should set up an independent police complaint process and all complaints should be investigated thoroughly" (RPTV: Police and Youth Relations Part III).



This is a suggestion that was also echoed at the *Strategizing Minds* forum, where contributors stressed the need to "police the police" with an independent police monitoring system. Another relevant recommendation previously made to Justice Canada by GYC was the need to "support community based safety initiatives that are independent of the Toronto Police Services or any other branch of enforcement" (GYC, 2006: 18). As was demonstrated by the decision to build a \$100 million youth superjail rather than invest those dollars into youth programming, politicians and Justice workers have shown that their responses to youth crime have been politically rather than socially

motivated. The meaningful inclusion and committed support of community-based approaches to safety would be a much-needed step in the other direction and would do much more for the violence that youth face than any other law-and-order approach.



economics & opportunity

STRATEGIZING MINDS

“There are brilliant young people who are inspired by our organizations but are not met with support from the outside world. These are people I would hire in my own company to be my second hand but instead are working at Tim Horton’s.”

[Strategizing Minds Participant, 2008]

While there is certainly violence that occurs outside of economic hardship, there is a general sense that if provided with viable and accessible pathways to meaningful economic self-sufficiency – many young people will not be forced into situations that put them at a higher risk of violence. There are a myriad of issues that surround economics, including *meaningful* employment, self-determination, career options, glass ceilings, discrimination in the workforce, and overall access.

At the *Strategizing Minds* forum, the **economics and opportunity** working group engaged in a lively discussion about the related challenges and barriers that youth in Toronto face. Many of the institutional barriers that put youth in compromising social circumstances also threaten the organizations that are dedicated to empowering and

engaging these same youth. Policy responses aimed at creating more opportunities for marginalized youth – economic or otherwise – must be coupled with sustained support for the organizations and groups that best relate to the lives and culture of these young people. Mario Murray (aka TheVoyce) was an organizer of *Strategizing Minds* and is also the Workshop Facilitator and Operations Coordinator for Beatz to do Streetz – a GYC member organization that runs an innovative arts program aimed at empowering and opening up opportunities for professional mentorship, education and income generation for homeless and underserved youth in Toronto. As part of the **economics and opportunity** working group in *Strategizing Minds*, Mario noted, “In the world, money keeps moving, all we have to do is have some move through our organizations so our youth don't always have to flip burgers but can get some real experience and skills from our administrative, coordinating and arts heavy work”

While we have separated this report into the categories of education, criminalization, economics/opportunity, and space for the purpose of convenience – it is important to note that none of these issues are mutually exclusive; but rather, all of these issues feed into each other in fundamental ways. It is impossible to discuss economics and opportunity without highlighting the effect that a lack of education has on getting a job, the near impossibility to gain sustainable employment with a criminal record, and how a lack of community space to run youth programming impedes organizations from providing critical life and social skills to marginalized youth. Nowhere do so many social determinants intersect as sharply as they do with homeless or street-involved youth. In 2004 the Toronto Youth Cabinet published a report on youth homelessness, *Catch us Before we Fall*, based on a two-part forum on shelter and housing

Fresh Voices

TYC: *Catch Us Before We Fall* (2004: 7)

Education and training:

- Homeless youth face numerous barriers of entry while enrolling in schools or other formal educational institutions, including internships and apprenticeships, further depriving them of their right to education.
- Homeless youth also face barriers of entry to employment enrichment programs.
- Homeless youth with mental illness and/or substance use issues lack adequately-focused support systems like harm reduction programs.
- Zero-tolerance in Safe Schools policies and legislation place at-risk youth in increasingly harmful situations, through suspensions and expulsions without productive activity and supports during these times.

Employment:

- Homeless youth surviving on social assistance have trouble finding jobs that pay a living wage. Whether they work or only receive social assistance, they currently receive virtually the same amount of money. Regular youth employment centres do not help youth with substance abuse issues.
- Complex barriers exist which prevent homeless youth with mental health and/or substance use issues from obtaining employment.

Report on Youth Homelessness

issues. Their report challenges policy makers to appreciate the ways in which mental health, substance abuse, educational policies, and social welfare systems all contribute to the precarious living conditions that so many young Torontonians are living in. This is yet another example that demonstrates the need to take a multi-faceted approach to youth development.

In 2006, The Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT), a youth-led GYC member organization, partnered with the Toronto Training Board to publish a report that

Fresh Voices

SOYAT: *Towards an Integrated Strategy* (2006: 17)

“When it comes to the agency, I have friend, she doesn’t wear hijab or anything, she’s not even a Muslim, but me and her are registered with the same agency, and we both have the same qualifications. With these agencies, you sit at home until they call you and find you a job. She keeps getting these calls about jobs and telling me about it, while I’m not getting any calls. And I have to call them and tell them to tell me about the job, and that’s how I found it”.

Somali youth participant

helps elucidate this problem. *Towards an Integrated Strategy: Maximizing use of local resources* is a report on the best practices and barriers to the use of North Etobicoke employment services by Somali youth. SOYAT spoke with employment agency staff, Somali parents, as well as Somali youth to understand why so few Somali youth used the employment agencies that were in North Etobicoke.

[To obtain a full copy of SOYAT’s report, please contact info@soyat.org]

They found that 82% of Somali youth surveyed had never taken part in any employment training program or service – consistent with the initial impetus of the study. The next step was an analysis of what the barriers were for Somali youth in accessing these services. While “many agency staff emphasized personal barriers such as single mother households, lack of role models, and parental shielding of children from the job market [...] the youth stressed institutional and systemic barriers such as racism, ageism, and institutional bias” (SOYAT, 2006: 5). There were also very practical concerns that reflect the shortcomings of the programs that *do* exist. For example, when asked to rank the most common barriers affecting their ability or willingness to use employment services in order of importance, transportation was by far the number one barrier cited by Somali youth who had never visited an employment agency. “They said they needed transportation or bus tickets when looking for jobs or starting work and these are not supplied by any of the agencies. The youth noted that many of their families are on social assistance”. (16) While some youth faced very practical barriers, others who had been through such agencies explained how their experiences with discrimination in the agency, workforce, and during the hiring process have made them disillusioned with such programs.

The inadequacy of many employment agencies and programs for youth is compounded by the reality that many of these young people are in dire economic situations. Young Diplomats (YD) – a youth-led GYC member organization that works with Ethiopian youth in Toronto conducted a community-based research project commissioned by the UN University for Peace in 2006. In *Youth Perspectives: Challenges to peacebuilding and development in the Ethiopian community*, YD presented their findings from their surveys and focus groups with over 175 Ethiopian youth from the GTA.

Youth were asked to describe their biggest challenges and problems in their day-to-day lives without any pre-selected options for their answers. Of the nine general categories under which their responses fell, the category of “finding a job/money problems” elicited the most responses, with 25.5% of the youth citing it as a primary concern (YD, 2006: 35). Through the questionnaires and focus groups, YD found that youth repeatedly stated that they lacked positive role models and as a result, they “resorted to non-constructive activities; were ill-informed about educational opportunities; had difficulty identifying resources in the community; and suffered economic constraints” (41). As this research was participatory and action-oriented, YD recommended that a comprehensive mentorship program that would encompass social, academic and professional streams be implemented for these youth – a highly successful program that YD has since implemented with funding from The Youth Challenge Fund and Toronto Community Housing.

[To obtain a full copy of YD’s report, please contact info@youngdiplomats.org]

Grassroots organizations can be utilized not only in helping youth find employment opportunities, but also as a source of employment itself. The funding provided for, and generated by such organizations create opportunities for young people to be hired as human resources to run programs, and also to find ways to pay youth through the programming activities and outputs. In GYC’s report *Youth on Youth*, Gavin Sheppard from IC Visions (now the REMIX project), explained that there was a great benefit to what is described as ‘social entrepreneurial ventures’ – something that deviates slightly from the non-profit norm.

Fresh Voices

GYC: *Youth on Youth* (2005: 50)

“I think [high turnover of projects and staff] affects young people around their housing because there are young people here who have rent to pay...There is an assumption around that youth are not living on their own and are thus not *relying* on a job like this [and] when they lose that support in a lot of ways they go backwards...They have to take a meaningless job at McDonald’s which is not giving them the skills to get into school to make it to the next stage.”

Adonis Huggins, Regent Park Focus

The same GYC report also highlighted the importance of paying appropriate wages to the youth who work in these grassroots non-profit sectors, as many of them use it as their only source of income and demonstrate their entitlement to adequate and

sustainable wages through their excellent work. Overall, there needs to be support coming from all directions: youth need more meaningful employment; relevant and equitable employment agencies must be established; grassroots organizations need sustainable funding; and there needs to be commitment to providing *all* youth with full access to opportunities after they do receive training and skills development. Like everything else presented in this report, there is a need to direct policies and dollars in more relevant and community-oriented ways.



Grassroots Action

The Remix Project is a youth-led arts program driven by young people aspiring to start careers in the urban arts sector. This program acts as a bridge to employment, education and mentorship by supporting youth's skills and aspirations in fields as vast as radio, music, film and television, animation and web design, graphic design, creative writing and photography, and creating opportunities for professional and creative development in these sectors.

s p a c e

STRATEGIZING MINDS

“There is an article written by a group of paediatricians ... what they said was that until it’s a white child that gets hurt there is no human view on it; they don’t really see it as a social problem that needs therapy, they see it as a criminal thing. So when we go and ask for space, they ask – *Space for what? For drug dealers, for hiding criminals?* Although they use the idea of multiculturalism to sell Toronto, they haven’t really adopted it themselves. When we talk about space, they don’t understand that it is not *theirs* – it’s not *their* space to *give* – it’s all of our space.”

[Strategizing Minds Participant, 2008]

To talk about space in relation to violence faced by youth is to acknowledge that young people need to be engaged in their day-to-day lives through social and recreational activities that are delivered by like-minded and culturally relevant organizations and people. It is to similarly acknowledge that there is no shortage of space in the absolute sense – rather, there is an unwillingness to recognize that *all* youth, from *all* backgrounds

and *all* walks of life are equal members of our society and thus deserve equal access to *all* the resources that are available.

For Youth Initiative (FYI) has been at the forefront of a movement that has been lobbying for more access to youth-friendly space for grassroots organizations. As an agency servicing the former City of York, they have been frustrated by an overall lack of community space made accessible to organizations like their own that work with youth from racialized and marginalized communities – and yet have so little space in which to do their work. With funding from the Trillium Foundation, FYI partnered with urbanArts in 2005 to conduct a comprehensive study that was primarily an investigation of space and asset mapping in the former City of York (Wards 11 and 12). After meetings and interviews with service providers, youth, and stakeholders, their study brought out some critical issues relating to space and program scarcity for youth in Wards 11 and 12 – but also raised critical awareness around general issues surrounding youth space in Toronto.

Fresh Voices

FYI: *Thinking About Tomorrow's Space Today* (2005: ii)

Space Issues:

1. The need for opening up school space
2. Inadequacies of existing space
3. Limited time availabilities and location of space
4. The monopolization of space by longstanding permit-holders
5. The lack of space specific for youth that is “youth-friendly”
6. The “political minefield” behind advocating for and securing community space
7. The sub-standard conditions of current facilities. (FYI, 2005: iii)

Youth Recreational Programming in the Former City of York

Accessing public space was also an important theme that surfaced from discussions with GYC members back in 2005, as documented by the collaborative's report *Youth on Youth*. Cutty Duncan, from Rathburn Area Youth (RAY) described the difficulties in achieving his organizational mission and mandate because of a lack of space: “We pretty much serve all of Central Etobicoke” [...] it's a big area [we're supposed to service] and there is not an agency here... So the space that you see downstairs is the only space that we have for community space, so we can't even promote it and stuff because then we would have too many people here...and we just don't have the space and facilities” (GYC, 2005: 45). GYC members chronicled the many institutional barriers they faced in their attempts at securing adequate and safe spaces to run youth recreational programming. The bureaucracy that community organizations must go through in their attempts at securing space for youth programming is highly unnecessary – not to mention counter-productive.

Vathany Uthayasundaram, the former Program Coordinator at Canadian Tamil Youth Development Centre (CANTYD) – a youth-led GYC member organization – described the “drawn out and oft unsuccessful bureaucratic process” that her staff go through just to get space for a basketball drop-in: “Even in trying to run a basketball drop in we have to run around asking all the community centres for a gym...some [of which] are prebooked a year ahead of time...And then there's funding for permits...There is a

whole process you have to go through... You call a certain department and then you fill out an application and then take it to another department ... but you don't have that time...and are often unsuccessful, and youth don't understand the process... We have money issues, space issues, permit issues!" (GYC, 2005: 45). For staff who are usually under-paid and over-worked – the tasks involved in simply securing space often takes valuable physical and human resources out of that organization's programming.

Some of the reluctance to open up existing municipal space to grassroots organizations is shaped by fiscal concerns (e.g. paying janitors to stay after hours). However, participants at a recreational forum held in 2002 by the Laidlaw Foundation have quite successfully argued that the gains of supporting enhanced recreational programs and infrastructure (even if they are only calculated in numbers) can easily outweigh the costs: "Investment in recreational opportunities for youth pays for itself. In the short term, low-income families who have access to recreational services leave social assistance in greater numbers and reduce their need for a broad range of social and health services. Over the longer term, recreational opportunities for youth result in stronger school attendance and achievement records and higher academic, social and interpersonal competence, and is a strong predictor for success in higher education and subsequent careers" (Cited in: FYI, 2005: 9).

Fresh Voices

FYI: Thinking About Tomorrow's Space Today (2005: 16)

"You know how much they're investing in sidewalks... they're putting up nasty lamps, like we need those or something like that! ... They have spent so much money making those poles that say 'Eglinton West', and they have a revolving ball! Is that supposed to give you community pride? Community pride would be a recreation centre. And you can fix the sidewalks we have to walk down, to get to the community centre. But right now they're investing in businesses."

Youth Voice, FYI

Contributors in the working group organized around **space** at the *Strategizing Minds* forum also conveyed a similar optimism relating to the impact that such opening of community space can have. They explained that many youth have a "geographic connection" to their neighbourhoods but lack a "real connection to the issues that the community faces". Extending full access to community resources could begin to seriously change this – as youth would see themselves as full members of their communities and their physical access would translate to civic access that could begin to mobilize youth around the issues that affect their communities. Andrea Zammit, the current co-coordinator of GYC and former Program Director of For Youth Initiative, further explained the importance of opening up youth-friendly space during *Strategizing Minds*:

Having worked in many of Toronto's underserved/low-income neighbourhoods for the past six years with young people, access to public space has been one of the biggest challenges. Many times young people live in small apartments sharing accommodations with a lot of family members. These young people need space to hang out with friends, quiet space to do their homework, a safe place that is free from police harassment/brutality, to express themselves in the

arts and to access social-recreational programming. Community Centres and programs run by mainstream social service providers that have facilities are not "youth-friendly" or accessible to youth, particularly Black youth.

The last report published by GYC, *From the Roots Up!*, included a recommendation to the City of Toronto to increase the use of facilities and space for youth-led programming. It is promising to see that there have been incremental steps towards this goal; the most recent being the announcement that the province of Ontario will increase its investment in the Community Use of Schools program to \$66 million over the next four years. The February 5th news release from the Office of the Premiere states that the new funding will:

- Expand the existing program
- Provide free after-hours access to about 500 schools in communities that need it most by 2011-12, and
- Provide new Community Outreach Coordinators who will engage communities and local schools to improve group use and create more programs and activities. (Office of the Premiere, 2008)

At the time of writing this report, this still remains a promise and only time will reveal the authenticity of this promise. Since the writing of FYI's report *Thinking About Tomorrow's Space Today* in 2005, the City has also agreed to look into building a community centre in their ward – the only one in the city without one. There are still problems with the City's proposed plan, as it would still include barriers to access for low-income residents – and like the provincial news release, it remains political rhetoric until it is implemented on the ground. Regent Park Focus Youth Media Centre is another organization that has been put in a precarious situation because of city redevelopment and lofty support from governmental agencies. As Adonis Huggins of Regent Park Focus explains, the centre was granted space in the new Regent Park redevelopment, however it has been made clear to them that they will no longer get this space in kind and TCHC and the City will have to recover the market rent for it. At *Strategizing Minds* he commented asking: "The question is why is the City abdicating their responsibility to build social infrastructure in stressed neighbourhoods and why does TCHC and the City feel that it can no longer be a partner in the provision of social capital in neighbourhoods that are owned by the TCHC/City? Part of their rationale is lack of investment from the Feds as they are too busy building SuperJails yet they (TCHC) have no problems investing in security cameras, which if diverted could be spent building a neighbourhood center in every public housing area in the city".

Fresh Voices

FYI: *Thinking About Tomorrow's Space Today* (2005: 25)

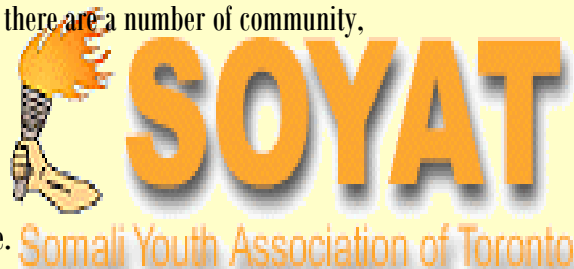
"If we mobilize the people in our community, we can raise the voices loud enough to say *you know what, we pay tax dollars like everyone else. We're not begging. We're asking for what is rightfully ours*"

Youth Voice, FYI

As one of the contributors at the *Strategizing Minds* forum expressed, we are “not arguing that a community centre is the answer”. All the issues outlined in this report warrant responses that translate into capital gains, but also responses committed to engaging youth at *all* stages of developing these gains. As the *Strategizing Minds* forum and all of the texts cited in this report demonstrate, young people are qualified and entitled to be consulted and included beyond token positions in decision-making processes. Youth violence is not an issue – it is a symptom. By resurrecting some of the many reports that have been published by grassroots organizations relating to these symptoms, the ‘findings’ of this report reflect hundreds of voices over several years across numerous communities in the city of Toronto. Anyone who is honest about their desire to reduce the violence that youth face – whether they are city residents, community workers, policy makers, or youth themselves – will take steps at addressing its roots, many of which have been outlined here.

Grassroots Action

Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT) is a non-profit youth based community organization serving Somali youth in Toronto since 1992. The organization places itself as a conduit of access for Somali youth and also collaborates with stakeholders to innovate appropriate services for Somali youth, children and other marginalized youth in their community. While there are a number of community, recreational, and employment centres in the North Etobicoke area that Somali youth have tended not to utilize, SOYAT’s space has proven to be youth-friendly and culturally relevant and as such, their centre and programs are highly utilized and effective.



DEMANDS

Since its inception the GYC has been asked and encouraged to make recommendations to governments; some examples include deputations to the municipal government, the Police Services Board and the Toronto District School Board (on multiple occasions). GYC has also attended and spoke on panels at municipal and provincial forums on “gun violence” and the Federally funded “From the Roots Up!” forum. We have seen little to no changes in policies from these government bodies.

Violence is a direct result of oppression and internalized oppression, which requires governments to first acknowledge the colonization and genocidal policies against Indigenous nations and land, systemic racism, poverty, ableism, ageism, sexism, heterosexism, etc., and it is not until then that governments can begin to create effective policies and programs that will have a meaningful impact on communities where high levels of violent incidents occur. Many of the young people that we work with have no trust in public institutions. After much encouragement from governments to participate in public processes, and a failure on their part to make much needed systemic changes to reduce violence in communities where many members live and work, GYC has recognized the need to create and sustain our own structures.

EDUCATION

1) REPEAL THE SAFE SCHOOLS ACT

Safe schools are not schools in which racialized youth, queer youth or differently abled youth are targeted for suspensions and expulsions. Rather, they are a place where students, teachers and parents work together with staff and administration to build a safe and open educational environment for all students.

The Safe Schools Act pushes students (particularly racialized students) out of the education system and criminalizes them. We believe that this Act has done more damage to our schools by minimizing the relationship of trust and education between teachers/principals and students and supplanted it with a relationship of authoritarianism and control.

We do not feel that the reforms presented on February 1st, 2008 actually address the serious issues brought forward by the Ontario Human Rights Commission including:

- *acknowledging the widespread perception that the Act has a disproportionate impact on students from racialized communities and students with disabilities*
- *confirming the concept of ‘zero tolerance’ has no place in the legislation, regulations or policies*
- *considering the application of progressive discipline as an alternative to suspensions and*

expulsions

- *requesting expanding the regulations on mitigating factors and requiring principals and school boards to consider such factors prior to suspending or expelling a student*
- *providing students who have been suspended or expelled access to alternative education opportunities*
- *supporting the collection of data on suspensions and expulsions and making this information available*
- *requiring significant training initiatives for principals, vice-principals and teachers on anti-racism, anti-discrimination, cultural awareness and disability accommodation along with training on amendments to the safe schools provisions*
- *working with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to promote, advertise and recruit teachers from racialized communities, persons with disabilities and other under-represented groups*
- *holding a provincial Safe Schools Symposium with participation by the Commission following passage of any amendments, and*
- *annual reporting to the Commission on progress of the agreement until completed.*

We have no confidence that the reforms presented by the government will legitimately address the issues noted above and instead, call on a complete repeal of this regressive legislation and a process of consultation with students, families and communities on developing school governance policies that are truly meant to make schools a safe and meaningful learning environment.

2) NEW ONTARIO EDUCATION CURRICULUM

The Ontario Education Curriculum isolates students, creates silos and streams that limit a student's ability to grow and is not adaptive to the multiplicity of issues, needs and educational goals of Ontario's students. This inevitably leads to an extremely high push-out rate amongst Indigenous and racialized youth in our communities. The new curriculum and standardized testing implemented by the Harris Conservatives in the mid/late 1990s has had a significant negative impact on developing learning environments that are adaptive and supportive of the diversity of cultures, learning styles and needs of students in Ontario.

The curriculum in Ontario is meant to align with the interests of the corporate sector who require an exploitable, docile and expendable workforce to maintain the profits in their industry. This leads to issues of streaming, Eurocentric academic curriculum, and labelling of students as "troublemakers" rather than addressing some of the root issues that cause students to rebel against or to lose hope in the current education system.

The Ontario curriculum should be redeveloped to include a diverse, integrated and honest account of history and society that is reflected within all courses (not just history or social sciences).

The Ontario curriculum should be redeveloped in collaboration with students, parents and

other organizations that have done a number of studies and proposed numerous improvements. Education is not simply about training someone to get a job, but building the whole robustness of experience that shapes a young person's life.

We believe that it is incumbent on the Government of Ontario to ensure that Ontario's education system is reflective of not just a history that shows Canada as a peace-keeping, multicultural utopic society, but rather one that is honest about Canada's ongoing genocide of Indigenous nations, the slavery of African peoples, the exploitation of migrant labour and the multitude of challenges and oppressions being fought by ordinary people.

Education should be flexible and adaptive to the needs of students and should be focused on building solutions with the community (not simply the next generation workforce).

3) MAKE POST SECONDARY EDUCATION ACCESSIBLE

While admissions to post-secondary institutions in Ontario may be on the rise the cost and the process for admission has become more limiting. The astronomical increase in tuition fees in Ontario since the early 1990s has left more students in debt or tied to employment opportunities that simply allow them to pay their student debt.

Education is a right. It should not be restricted to those who have the means to pay for it! We demand a drastic reduction in tuition fees immediately! This must be coupled with the re-introduction of a system of grants and scholarships that reduce a student's reliance on debt to finance their education and a university environment free from corporate interference.

We also demand that being on social assistance not hinder your ability to receive funding to go to post-secondary and call on the Ontario Government to end the practice of disallowing people living on welfare to obtain loans from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).

CRIMINALIZATION

1) REPEAL THE "SAFE STREETS" ACT

The "Safe Streets" Act is a social cleansing bill that aims to criminalize and attack the most poor and vulnerable people in our city. Particularly offensive is the way it targets poor and homeless youth and its impact on their ability to obtain jobs and social services that would address some of the root issues that they face on the street.

With a ban on "aggressive panhandling" and no definition of what constitutes "aggressive" poor, homeless and marginalized youth are often targeted and harassed by police officers for occupying public space in the downtown core. We believe the "Safe Streets" Act actually makes the streets more dangerous for poor and homeless youth and can lead to significant abuses of power by police officers and security guards.

We call on the Government Ontario to legislate an immediate repeal of this repressive piece of legislation and to actually address issues that cause people to be on the street in the first place including: inadequate supply of affordable housing; lack of funding for emergency support services for homeless or under-housed people; lack of strong legislation to protect tenants (rather than the Tenant Protection Act which primarily serves to protect Landlords).

2) STOP THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ROY MCMURTRY YOUTH SUPER JAIL

The rate of incarceration of young people in Ontario is significantly higher than most jurisdictions in Europe and even some in the United States. It is clear that Indigenous and Black youth are statistically over-represented in the prison system and particular the youth prison system. Most youth offenders continue to be non-violent offenders, yet the government of Ontario and the mainstream media's framing of violent crimes involving youth in Toronto as "the Summer of the Gun" and stigmatizing poor and racialized communities as "violent" or "dangerous" has created a panacea within our communities and has resulted in an increased targeting of Black youth by police.

The Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) that came into effect in 2003 attempted to address some gross injustices that were apparent in the Young Offenders Act that preceded it. One such redress of issues, was the logical step to minimize the rate of incarceration of young people and to provide young people with alternatives to incarceration. We believe that the Federal legislation Bill C-2 "Anti-Violent Crime Legislation" is a direct attack on the progress that was fought for and won by our communities in the YCJA and will undoubtedly result in increased incarceration of young people and further disparities with regard to the incarceration rate of young people.

In 2004 after a Coroner's Inquest into the suicide death of David Meffe at the "Toronto Youth Assessment Centre (TYAC), the report from the inquest made a clear statement that large closed custody youth prisons were counterproductive, overly punitive and not likely to facilitate support for those youth incarcerated.

Specifically the Meffe Report called for:

RECOMMENDATION # 4.

Location of New Toronto Youth Detention Facilities - New Facilities for the custody and detention of youth in Toronto (replacing TYAC) to be constructed as smaller stand alone facilities located throughout the GTA. Potentially, have one location for each of the major cities (Scarborough, North York, Toronto, Etobicoke, etc).

Rationale:

This would reinforce the Ministry's commitment to a philosophy of family and community involvement in treating and managing youth in custody and detention, as well as compliance to the "United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child". This would also acknowledge the fundamental difference in support needs between adults and youth. This recommendation is aligned to the research and expert witness testimony submitted on managing youth in detention. Multiple small locations will;

- *Facilitate critical family access and community support for the youth.*
- *Allow management of youth in smaller groups allowing more one- on-one time to develop custodial relationships and reducing the risk of peer on peer violence.*

Instead, the Government of Ontario has made the decision to continue the construction of the Roy McMurtry Youth “Super Jail”¹ a 192-bed facility that will cost the Province of Ontario over \$100 Million to construct and which directly contradicts the recommendation for small stand alone facilities that would bring the Province of Ontario in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. While youth incarceration rates dropped under the YCJA, we believe that the new Federal legislation will inevitably lead to a rise in incarceration of youth, longer sentences and harsher penalties.

We call on the Ontario Government to immediately halt construction of the Roy McMurtry Super Jail, to renovate the uncompleted prison into an actual community centre for youth in Brampton and North Toronto and to take the recommendations outlined in the Meffe inquest seriously. We do not want more jails in our communities; we do not believe they make our communities safer.

3) IMPLEMENT AN INDEPENDENT SYSTEM OF POLICE MONITORING: STOP POLICE BRUTALITY AND HARASSMENT

For too long police impunity has been prevalent within Ontario (and particularly Toronto). From the murders of Dudley George, Jeffrey Reodica, Edmond Yu, Alwy al-Nadhir and Byron Debagassie to the constant harassment, profiling and disrespect of racialized, marginalized and homeless youth in the city of Toronto, we have witnessed some of the most blatant cases of police violence and oppression in our communities. We say: “Enough is Enough!”

We demand that the Ontario Government implement a comprehensive and independent police monitoring and abuse reporting system that is community controlled and that addresses the serious issues facing community-police relations. We want less talk about community policing and more talk about policing the police! Police officers should respect and be driven by communities, not intimidate, harass and violate them at will.

The Ontario Government continues to be reactionary in the face of violent incidents within our communities by hiring more police officers, increasing funding for “guns and gangs” squads and building lavish super jails for youth. We think this is the absolutely wrong approach and completely contradicts any work towards addressing the root causes of violence in our communities.

Police complaints should be processed through independent community-run police complaints tribunals in each police division in the city. These community-run police

¹ We reject the Government of Ontario using the term Youth Centre to describe a prison. We think it is an affront to the work of youth centres throughout Ontario that engage in positive and community-based work. This facility, at 192 beds, the largest youth incarceration facility in Ontario is more aptly described as a “Super Jail”.

complaints tribunals should have the power to suggest the suspension, firing or criminal prosecution/investigation of police officers to the Toronto Police Services Board and the Chief of Police.

The militarization of our streets, our schools, our youth organizations and community centres through increased police presence only exacerbates the problems, tensions and issues that impact our community. The ballooning police budgets in our cities is a direct affront to those who have fought for more social housing, better funding for schools and youth organizations and more access to community space.

We demand that the Government of Ontario start taking police violence seriously!

We demand that the Government of Ontario begin to conduct research studies similar to those in the United States which show that increased enforcement and incarceration have no/little correlation with a decrease in crime rates.

We demand effective and frequent human rights/anti-oppression training for police officers especially with regards to new policies and procedures (i.e. the “Don’t Ask” with respect to undocumented people policy passed by the Toronto Police Services Board in February 2006).

4) PASS A PROVINCIAL “ACCESS WITHOUT FEAR” POLICY TO ENSURE THAT RESIDENTS OF ONTARIO WITHOUT FULL IMMIGRATION STATUS HAVE ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL SERVICES

There are estimates of over 500,000 people living and working in Canada without full immigration status and more than 80,000 of those people living in the city of Toronto alone. As youth organizations and in our communities we work with undocumented people on a regular basis, sometimes as some of the only social services that they can access without fear of being detained or deported.

We are endorsers and supporters of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” Campaign and demand that the Ontario Government support the rights of all those living and working in Ontario without full immigration status to access essential community services like schools, women’s shelters, community centres, youth programs, health services and emergency services without fear of detention and/or deportation.

Further we demand that the Government of Ontario use its powers under immigration law to immediately begin implementing a system to grant permanent residency to undocumented workers in Ontario.

ECONOMICS and OPPORTUNITY

1) RAISE THE MINIMUM WAGE TO A LIVING WAGE

As the province of Ontario continues its transition into a service-based employment

economy, many secure, reasonable paying unionized jobs have been replaced with precarious, part-time, service-based jobs that pay wages that are well-below what one needs to subsist in cities like Toronto.

Youth in this province are convinced and coerced into finding more and more service sector jobs through “job seek” programs and government ads with the express intention of ensuring that the corporate sector has a cheap and exploitable workforce. The lack of employment opportunities that are full-time, non-contractual and reasonably paying continues to fall and this is not reflected in the “unemployment rate”.

There have been calls for an increase in minimum wage to \$10/hr in Ontario, at our calculations, even if one is able to find a full-time job (37.5 hrs/wk) at that rate, they would only gross \$19,500. We believe that this remains criminally low and does not ensure that someone working minimum wage can afford to subsist in the city of Toronto. We call on the government of Ontario to implement a “living wage” minimum wage of at least \$15/hr plus an annual increase adjusted to the cost of living adjustment (COLA) on an annual basis.

2) YOUTH SELF-EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Self-employment is often a means for youth in our communities to extricate themselves from dead-end McJobs in the service industry. However, Ontario’s current programs to support youth self-employment are often difficult to access, complicated to navigate and don’t always provide youth with the skills/training necessary to ensure that their small business/community enterprise can thrive under the predatory pricing and intense competition of large corporations that receive significant tax breaks and subsidies (corporate welfare) from governments.

We demand the creation of an open and accessible social enterprise fund that is highly funded (not just another \$15 Million 3 year investment), is staffed by employees that are knowledgeable and experienced working with youth entrepreneurial initiatives, that is open and creative, and that helps to build skills. We also demand that the government not tie these types of programs to corporate/bank loans in some sort of private/public partnership that ends up putting youth social entrepreneurs in debt to the profit of the big banks!

3) 40% INCREASE IN SOCIAL ASSISTANCE AND ODSP NOW!

Since the drastic cuts to social assistance and ODSP under the Mike Harris regime, impoverished people in the province of Ontario and particularly in the city of Toronto have been living in dire poverty, often having to make decisions around whether to spend money on food or shelter. This is appalling and the Government of Ontario under Dalton McGuinty have done nothing but a meagre 3% increase in rates to relieve people of the starvation and homelessness that this cut has produced.

The health of young people in Ontario is being significantly compromised by the

criminally low rates of social assistance and ODSP. We demand an immediate 40% increase in social assistance to bring welfare rates closer in line with the subsistence rates prior to the Harris era. While the purchasing power of Ontarians (and particularly those in Toronto) continues to diminish, the government has set back as people are forced to choose between shelter and food for their children, as food bank use hits all-time highs and as jobs become more precarious than ever before.

4) INCREASE SOCIAL HOUSING & REPAIR CURRENT SOCIAL HOUSING STOCK

There is a social housing crisis in Toronto. Not only is there a ten year waiting list to get into social housing in the city, but the stock of existing housing is in severe disrepair. We are concerned that the practice of social cleansing like the gentrification of Regent Park has been confused with meaningful and real solutions for the housing crisis we are facing. We do not want to be forced out of our homes and communities, but rather we want the government to step up and start to build and repair social housing that accommodates all those who can no longer afford housing in the city of Toronto.

We support the 1% solution that was put forward by the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and other academic and social groups. We believe that housing should be a right for all people living in the province of Ontario and that the realities of youth homelessness are directly linked to the fact that housing in the city of Toronto is unaffordable. We call on the government of Ontario to stop propping up the business of condominium development and speculation (which artificially inflates the cost of rent for all people living in the city) and invest in social housing and repair that makes our communities safer and healthier!

We are also tired of governments (Federal, Provincial and Municipal) passing the buck to each other with regard to how to deal with this issue. We recognize that it is the responsibility of ALL THREE levels of government to make this implementation happen immediately and that bureaucratic wrangling is no longer acceptable.

5) INVESTMENT IN TTC AND TRANSPORTATION

Transportation costs in the city of Toronto continue to skyrocket. Youth and youth organizations who depend on the TTC have been systematically shut out of travel in this city due to exorbitantly high costs for transportation. Toronto's transportation system has been placed in a crisis because of downloading and lack of investment from the Federal and Provincial governments.

We demand that the Government of Ontario acknowledge their responsibility to addressing the funding crisis for transportation in the city of Toronto. \$2.75 per trip is higher than almost any other jurisdiction in North America and has created significant issues of isolation and immobility for youth across the city. The Ontario government must invest immediately in both infrastructure and operating expenses of transportation. Moreover, the Ontario Government must work directly with the Federal Government and the City of Toronto to lower the cost of fares, improve the infrastructure of the TTC and

to invest in the future of public transportation throughout the province.

6) UNIVERSAL DAY-CARE PROGRAM

In the current economic context, working parents have little to no affordable options for childcare. This lack of affordable options leads to significant economic constraints and missed job opportunities.

We believe that universal child care is a quintessential part of a social system that ensures the full participation of both men and women, single parents and young families. We also must condemn the exploitative practices of the “live-in caregiver” program that uses Filipino and Caribbean women as cheap and exploitable labour. We believe that child care provision needs to be respected as the important work that it is.

As such we demand a universal child care program that pays workers fairly and that ensures access and quality child care for all people living in Ontario.

SPACE

1) BUILD AND INVEST IN COMMUNITY SPACE

There is a significant shortage of accessible and quality community space needed for youth organizations, small social enterprises, community groups and neighbourhoods. Most city-controlled space lacks in accessibility and many neighbourhoods in Toronto lack a community centre at all. Spaces in low-income neighbourhoods do exist within Toronto Community Housing, the school system and in mainstream organizations, and while the racialized youth within these communities could benefit the most from this space, they find it the least accessible.

We demand that the Government of Ontario invest in a fund that directly supports the building of community centres that would be controlled, kept up and staffed by community members themselves. We feel it is critical for more youth-led spaces to exist in the city that are creative and evolve with the changing needs of the community. The physical spaces do exist, but the bureaucracy in accessing such spaces is a massive barrier for youth and youth organizations. Barriers must be removed that prevent access for groups or individual young people that want to run study groups, hold dance practices, basketball games or even start their own drop-ins or after-school programs.

Moreover, we believe that schools are an integral part of building community and demand that all schools be made available for free use by the community after school hours. We also call on the Government of Ontario to put programs in place to help integrate community groups with student groups and build stronger neighbourhoods and spaces of learning.

2) STOP THE PRIVATIZATION OF SOCIAL SPACES

Increasing privatization of social spaces, like the developments happening at Yonge-Dundas Square have led to an increased policing of social spaces and an increased sense that to be a part of a community one must be a consumer in it. This type of exclusion of poor people and youth from “legitimate” social spaces has created a culture of supervision and policing that is far more aggressive than ever before. The use of regressive policies like the “Safe Streets Act” to cleanse these privatized “public” spaces is readily apparent.

Public space creates a hub for communities to engage in positive activities, have an outlet for physical activity, and mobilize as a collective around the issues that matter to them. The proliferation of privatization that we have witnessed in our communities have brought increased policing, bureaucracies and financial exclusion that renders these spaces inaccessible to many of the people who live in these very communities. We have also seen an increase in public facilities charging general public user fees and thus these spaces should no longer be called *public*.

We demand that the Ontario Government begin a process and consultation with Ontarians about the use of public space for private and commercial purposes. We want the hypocrisy of commercialized spaces being given the right to poster throughout the city, while many poor and marginalized people are being ticketed for simply being on the street to stop!

3) DEVELOP A PLAN TO FUND PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR YOUTH-LED WORK

A critical part of building safe and healthy communities is supporting and developing safe and open spaces for young people to develop programs, run workshops and support their communities. This must be done in a way in which youth-led initiatives have the space and resources to effectively take on the work that is needed in their communities. The provincial government should invest in social capital and physical infrastructure in marginalized and racialized communities (as well as in the downtown core) to provide services that are directed towards youth. These spaces should be youth-centred and not simply extended to mainstream social service providers.

Community development can only happen if people have the space to congregate, build their communities and work with each other in collaborative and creative ways. The current context of instability in funding for youth-led initiatives and being forced to move from space to space creates insecurity, precarity and an inability to maintain long-term programs in particular communities. All of these issues would contribute to the alleviation of violence, poverty and lack of resources in our communities.

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