

The Relevance of *The Young Canadian Leadership Challenge* In 2008-9 by Brian C. Bailey M.D. (program founder)



Changes to the *Young Offenders Act* to be enacted in the current session of Parliament, create a “clear and present” need for a national preventive approach to youth violence. Mentioned in passing during the 2008 election campaign with a price tag of \$10 million, a national youth violence prevention campaign in treacherous economic times needs to be able not only to prevent youth crime, but to save money for the federal coffers at the same time. This is a daunting challenge at a time when existing youth programs, with a few notable exceptions, have not been noted for either effectiveness or cost savings.

Statistics Canada indicates that while overall youth crime has abated significantly in the last 15 years, violent crime among 12 to 17 year olds has surged 30% since 1991. “*Sending a message*” that young lawbreakers will be held responsible for their behaviour is one thing, but turning youths away from violence is another. While 20% of youth crime is deterred by tougher sentences, 80% is not. So, we have part of the answer. It remains to be seen how we are as a nation to approach this 80%.

Violence is endemic among today’s youth. Crime is not. Each youth who commits an antisocial act of violence, even those who never reach the courts, costs the public purse \$73,000 throughout the time of their adolescence, a cost only which increases should they reach adulthood with a violent streak. Each youth turned away from violence is a double win for Canada - also saving Canadian taxpayers \$100,000.

What underlies youth violence?

Certainly not crime. While violent acts perpetrated by recidivist youth grab the headlines, most youth violence is bullying at its first outbreak, and occurs at a time when preventive efforts can still be put in play. Once a young offender has joined a gang, preventive efforts have proven unworkable. Here, as has been determined in the U.S., we would be wasting our money. This is a place where tougher sentencing may indeed reap results - if not rehabilitation - prevention of the public from harm. The dividing line of prevention occurs at the place where young offenders have been celebrated by their peers for the violent nature which has bubbled up over years.

The one multinational program which has distinguished itself as violence-preventive is *Big Sisters Big Brothers*. Both its successes and its failures have shown us much about what works with youth. Single parent youth are matched with well-screened adults, and these pairs meet to share activities on a regular basis, and at a cost of about \$1,000 per match per year. BSBB run few programs where youth encounter each other. All of BSBB’s successes have come from matches in which the adult is “non-prescriptive” - allowing, celebrating, nonjudgmental, and all of its failures have come from matches which have turned out to be attempts to reform the younger member. A full 80% of such “prescriptive” matches are terminated by the younger member before completion. When successful, BSBB matches are associated with a one third lower tendency to engage in violence with other youth.

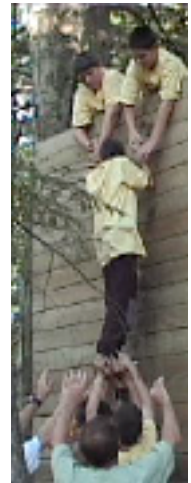


Violence among youth is positively correlated with the slow maturation of the frontal brain, which when fully mature at age 17-18 introduces “*sober second thought*” - and while in its immature state is associated with risk-taking, impulsiveness, failure to hear adult warnings and lack of relational competency.

Here we see both the seeds of violence, and the shortsightedness of adult attempts to stem the tide - which generally take the form of increased warnings when societal warnings have been ignored. Intuitively we all know that youth are not listening! Research has also proven time and time again what we already know - that programs which target *youth at risk* alone - create better criminals.

Why the Young Canadian Leadership Challenge?

Without going into detail here (see: *Why the YCLC?* at <http://www.yclc.ca/videtour.html>) let me lay out why this program fits the bill as a national strategy to combat youth violence. First and foremost, it parallels the BSBB approach - creating an interface between adults and youth which is, by intentional design - respectful, laudatory, celebratory - and seldom, if ever, critical, instructive or advice-giving. Second, it expands and compliments the BSBB approach by being primarily an effective, grippingly-attractive interface among youth, with adults playing sideline roles - affording youth a palpable sense of creating their own program. Third - it has been prototype tested, redesigned between prototypes - and it works even better than the design would have predicted - by tapping deeply into the youth's previously unexamined experience, allowing them to graft on exciting new pieces - exciting to them and to the adults as well.



Girls pursuing an outdoor challenge game element

What is the format?

Youth gather in gender-specific weekend-long camp-outs - which feature their engagement in teams of time-tested Ropes Course events - used since World War II as effective training vehicles for adult *outside-the-box* thinking. Added to the regular post-event debriefing sessions during which new skills are solidified are a second level of scrutiny applied to what has been learned. The youth ask themselves what “values” (e.g. *compassion*) have been tapped or could have been tapped to ensure their success - then have to defend their choices with a costumed adult panel. Costumes have been added, along with a fantasy scenario reminiscent of video games - to distance what is happening here from what happens in school. No *tell-the-adults-what-they-want-to-hear* responses are allowed through, and soon the youth find themselves digging deeply for answers. When they dig deeply enough they are rewarded with both individual and team honours - which they keep only as long as they demonstrate the very values they have discovered that make their team work. A critical mass is reached, a virtual “*tipping point*” where aggressive team members (bullies) see that they can lead by getting the less aggressive youth (the bullied youth) fully into the game by encouraging them. After this point, team members forge ways to find respect for themselves and each other, and at a second critical point, about two thirds of the way through, youth get to articulate what they want and now expect from themselves - and what stands in the way of achieving that goal. This marks the emergence of the unexpected - a stunning experience which eclipses the design, when young people seize upon an uncharacteristic maturity and rush with it to the finish line. A year later, the values they have embraced, are seen to have been strengthened. Add-on programs can make these results even more powerful.



What is the cost and cost-effectiveness?

Again, the design always assumed that such an event would be self-financed, not reliant on outside funding. Ninety percent of the labour to create such an event is volunteer labour, and a hundred per cent of the materials needed could be procured by public donation with a small effort expended. The expertise to keep the implementation true to the design is largely transferable to local operators - who span the full age spectrum from overage youth to senior citizens - creating a bursary-type system which rewards excellence in civic participation in much the way academic bursaries reward academic excellence.

We propose that government supply seed financing for initial events in a community and maintenance of a pool of expertise to initiate new communities to the process. After an initial event, the community, and/or its local service clubs or equivalents undertake maintenance financing - moving towards program revenues meeting program expenses - then creating self-sufficiency. A forward-looking government could put this in place for the \$10 million available, spent over the first two years of the program, after which the program could be financed through savings realized in the justice system, turning its \$10 million investment into a \$100 million saving in justice system expenditures.