

*The Wahkohtowin Strengthening Families Program: at the
Intersection of Age, Gender, Race and Socio-economic
Status in Winnipeg*

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Children who experience violence are twice as likely to be victimized or to perpetuate violence as adults (Boyce 2016). Studies show that there is transmission across different types of violence, such that exposure to any type of violence – child abuse, community crime, intimate partner violence, war – may increase one’s risk of perpetrating or further experiencing any kind of violence (see Kaufman & Zigler 1987; Dubow et al. 2009; Widom 1989). When structural violence, moreover, systematically prevents youths from meeting their basic needs, it causes the type of desperation and anger that later may erupt in physical violence. Both forms of violence deplete community resources and atrophy the repertoire of imagined possible futures of its constituents.

Homicide rates are important in having become the standard benchmark for levels of societal violence more generally (Ouimet & Montmagny-Grenier, 2014), and high homicide rates undermine public perceptions of community safety. By the end of 2018, Manitoba had reported the highest provincial homicide rate in Canada for two consecutive years, with 4.07 homicides per 100,000 people, increasing from 3.52 in 2017 (Roy & Marcellus 2019) – a rate that is more than double the national average. In Winnipeg, there were twenty-two homicides in 2018, twenty-four in 2017, twenty-six in 2016, and twenty-five in 2014 and 2015 (WPS 2019). The highest number of youths involved in these in any given year was nine. Each year there are an almost equivalent number of *attempted* murders. In 2019, there were 41 homicides, with 11 occurring over a period of 30 days (WPS 2020).

A demographic assessment of Winnipeg crime indicates that 34% of violent crimes are conducted by adult men, with 8% by adult women, 5.2% by young men and 3.1% by young

women (WPS 2019). According to the General Social Survey (GSS) on victims, however, the overall rate of violent victimization among Indigenous people in 2014 was more than double that of non-Indigenous peoples (163 incidents, versus 74/1,000 people) and Indigenous men and boys were seven times more likely than non-Indigenous males to be victims of homicide (Boyce 2016:3). Meanwhile, Indigenous women and girls suffer rates of violent victimization that are double that of Indigenous men, triple that of non-Indigenous women and girls, and more than triple that of non-Indigenous men (Boyce et al. 2014). In 2015, Indigenous people represented 5% of the population of Canada, but accounted for 25% of all homicide victims (Boyce 2016).

In Manitoba, the proposed solutions to youth victimization and crime have disproportionately reflected investments in “suppression” rather than “prevention” or “intervention.” As a result, despite that youth incarceration declined throughout Canada by 33% from 2013 to 2017, Manitoba’s youth incarceration rate continues to be the highest in country at 22 per 10,000 in 2017 (Malakieh 2018). That year, seventy-six per cent of those incarcerated were male, and 55% were youth aged 16 and 17 (ibid). Indigenous youth accounted for 46% of admissions to correctional institutions in 2016/17, while comprising only 8% of the youth population in Canada (ibid). These numbers would suggest that the “suppression and segregation” methods currently employed to reduce violence and to ameliorate family crisis in Winnipeg are simply not effective and that greater resources must be invested in evidence-based preventative efforts.

Gaps in preventive family violence and addictions programming have contributed to the problem. Manitoba possesses the highest per-capita rate of children in care. While approximately 26% of the population of children in Manitoba is Indigenous, they account for 89% of children in care (Brownell et al. 2015). One infant per day is taken into care in Manitoba (MB Child 2017, WHRA 2018). Investments at the suppression end of the crime prevention continuum continue to outweigh preventive efforts, despite evidence which unequivocally asserts that policing does not reduce family distress or youth victimization, nor does it restore the sovereignty of the family (Buddle 2020, 2018, 2015a and b).

The literature on Newcomer social exclusion, including “integration challenges” and poverty, strongly suggests that they often experience profound forms of precariousness which current mental health programming fails to ameliorate. Newly arrived refugees in Canadian cities experience social exclusion and multiple forms of disadvantage (Danso 2001). Multiple systemic barriers impede their learning and acculturation processes and contribute to financial hardship, low paid jobs, a lack of affordable housing, a lack of social and community networks, problematic substance use, and criminal involvement (Magro & Ghorayshi 2011).

The rate at which youth crime and victimization are growing, and the fact that the vast

majority of youth charged with offences will be returned to their families and community with warnings or conditional sentences such as probation, make preventing and addressing the underlying causes of youth violent offending behaviours an urgent concern.

The Strengthening Families Program® is a culturally adaptable multifaceted, multi-systemic intervention (Miller & Hendrie, 2008) which can be tailored to meet the unique needs of specific sub-cultural groups and which can be delivered by SFP trained paraprofessionals in non-clinical, community agency settings. Developed by Indigenous Psychologist, Karol Kumpfer, SFP is a curriculum-based approach that teaches youth and their identified families techniques of self-regulation and communication, along with problem-solving skills such as improved communication, bonding, parental monitoring, supervision, discipline, family organization and rule setting (Kumpfer et al. 2000, 2002; Kumpfer & Alvarado 2003; Biglan & Taylor 2000; Petrie, Bunn & Byrne 2007).

The program is comprised by 14 structured weekly 3-hour sessions of family skills training, designed primarily to prevent substance use and to promote family cohesion and individual resilience. From 2016-2021, the program has been offered in Winnipeg from four delivery sites, each offering the program three times per year. It has served 433 youth, plus their respective family members to date. The program's objectives are to stabilize Indigenous, Newcomer, and other youth involved in gang violence or criminal activity, who are involved with the justice system or at risk of becoming involved through the provision of family-centered, asset-based, anti-oppressive, decolonizing programming. The core elements include education to reduce criminogenic behavior, and to strengthen assets, mentoring, cultural reclamation, intercultural competency building, emotional training, employment preparation and assistance, advocacy, case management and family skill building.

SFP for ages 11-18 engages Winnipeg's highest risk youth in the most economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods of the city, where criminal activity is most intense (North End, North Central, Central and Central West). Offering programming from sites with which families are already familiar eliminates the necessity of entering hostile territory to access services. Providing culturally safe and relevant programming, transportation, a meal, childcare, and mentorship throughout the week eliminates other participation barriers.

The partners include the University of Manitoba Anthropology Department (Dr. Kathleen Buddle, Principal Investigator and Evaluation Lead), two Indigenous-led community-based organizations – Ka Ni Kanichihk Inc. (Program Manager, Natalie Carreiro; Founder, Leslie Spillet and Executive Director, Dodie Jordaan; Administrative leadership), and Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad Inc. (ED, Kayla Stubbs,) – along with Spence Neighbourhood Association (ED, Lin Howes Barr) and a Mosque/community organization, the Bilal Community and Family Centre (Muhaidin Omar, President and Imam).

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To date, many families engaged in the program had already been separated by social services interventions and use our gathering space for an officially sanctioned supervised visit. Approximately half of these families have been reunited on a more permanent basis as a result of completing the program. Others have been referred into addictions, crisis and more intensive individualized trauma counseling. The program is flexible enough to accommodate the unique needs of individual youths, thus alleviating the institutional fatigue that many youths endure as they pass through one institutional setting after another, where the application of one-size-fits-all solutions to their complex problems has the accumulated effect to erode all confidence in their capacities for self-determination.

Newcomer families at the Bilal Centre, where the program has been delivered in Arabic (multiple dialects), Tigrinya, and Somali, use the space to learn and practice their English, to form bonds in the community, and to openly discuss the online threats of violent radicalization which target Muslim youth. Here, Wahkohtowin serves as a critical bridge between Newcomer and Indigenous families.

Wahkohtowin is one of the basic principles of Cree Natural Law. It refers to rules governing the relationships between humans and between humans and the ‘more-than-human’ world. The Wahkohtowin partners have adapted the curriculum by encouraging the incorporation of Indigenous, Newcomer, and other cultural knowledge systems whenever possible. This includes upholding cultural protocols regarding appropriate communication concerning the family, gender, sexuality, age, and discussing how they intersect with Canadian laws and cultural practices among other factors; providing medicines, gifts and teachings based in cultural knowledge systems and involving elders and cultural specialists; encouraging participation in smudges, talking circles, feasts, and broader ceremonies; and employing consciousness raising activities to increase awareness of the ongoing impacts of colonization, conflict, war, forced migration and other external factors on traditional parenting (Buddle 2011).

Wahkohtowin-SFP nurtures in youth the strength they will require to negotiate the ongoing inequities they will inevitably encounter as marginalized members of the community. The program cannot change the structural constraints that situate socio- economically and culturally marginalized youth at the lowest rungs of Canadian society. It does, however, provide a plan for engaging youth and their families in immediate and actionable strategies which have the capacity to profoundly alter their circles of influence - ejecting the destructive elements and reinforcing and introducing new foundations of support - thus making their immediate lives infinitely more livable and their futures more hopeful. Offering supports, treatment and strategies for managing crisis, the process aims to dramatically reduce the factors which make violence and criminal activity viable options for youths and families in distress.

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