

Identifying Promising Practice for Chinese Youth in Conflict with the Law in Canada

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Key Details

KEY WORDS

Chinese Youth, Criminal Justice System, Crime, Youth Criminal Justice Act, Extrajudicial Measures, Visible Minority Youth

POPULATION GROUPS

Racialized Youth
Youth in Conflict with the Law
Youth Workers

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health & Wellness
Strong, Supportive Friends & Families
Education, Training & Apprenticeships
Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety
Coordinated & Youth Friendly Communities

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Canada

SOURCE

Academic

“The lack of race-based data regarding youth involved with the law creates barriers to effectively providing appropriate prevention and rehabilitation services and program... there is a need for evidence-based culturally responsive programs and practices that meet the needs of different racialized youth” (p. 9).

1. What is the research about?

This research explores the views and collaborative efforts of those working with Chinese youth in conflict with the law, combining the findings of two studies. The authors were looking to understand the role of race and culture when examining both the experiences of Chinese youth in conflict with the law and practice interventions, and to map out a pathway to criminality for Chinese youth. The objective of this report was to develop a culturally-sensitive practice model for Chinese youth in conflict with the law.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in the Greater Toronto Area between 2015 and 2016, building upon research that took place in the areas of Greater Vancouver and Greater Toronto in 2005/2006.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about Chinese youth in conflict with the law in Canada.

4. How was the research done?

The authors worked with two research community partners in Toronto – Across U-hub and Chinese Family Services of Ontario – to form a Research Advisory Committee for this project, through which 10 community members advised the research focus and process.

This qualitative research comprises individual, face-to-face interviews with 27 service providers from the social service, education, and criminal justice sectors working with Chinese youth in conflict with the law. All levels of service providers were interviewed, including frontline, middle management, and senior administration. Interviews were recorded and transcribed (written out word-for-word).

The authors conducted a literature review in order to verify their preliminary practice model, focusing on current policy frameworks and initiatives, as well as promising practices for youth generally – and racialized youth more specifically – in conflict with the law.

Of the 27 interview participants, six joined a subsequent focus group, designed to address questions from the interviews and literature review, and to modify the initial practice model. The focus group was also recorded and transcribed.

As mentioned above, this research builds on interviews with 56 Chinese youth and their parents, conducted in 2005/2006. The authors also conducted a secondary data analysis on data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (2000-2001), a long-term study designed to collect information about factors influencing a child's social, emotional, and behavioural development, and the impact of these factors over time.

5. What are the key findings?

The findings shared in this report provide an outline of

a) the criminal pathway for Chinese youth, and **b) a promising practice model for Chinese youth in conflict with the law**.

a) Criminal Pathway

The criminal pathway of Chinese youth in conflict with the law is a process of **managing a damaged self-identity**. The authors first identify the four structural contexts that inform this process:

i) *Perceived Blocked Opportunities*: the obstacles perceived by Chinese youth to impede their success, in school and in society (i.e. differential treatment based on racial discrimination).

ii) *Cultural Values*: the way in which parents and youth “internalize the problem” (p. 24), attributing criminal involvement to individual inadequacy rather than systemic inequality.

iii) *Criminality*: the way in which the degree of criminal involvement shapes youth’s individual experiences in the system.

iv) *Support System*: the informal resources provided by family and friends, as well as the formal supports accessed through systems and services.

The process comprises **four stages**:

i) **Redefining Self**: Youth proactively engage in redefining their sense of self and cope with their experiences; often, this occurs once they are labelled as ‘bad’ after becoming involved with the criminal justice system. During this stage, youth will work to “patch up” (p. 24) their family relationships and resist further criminal activity. Youth and their families are more proactive in seeking support; parents will often seek outside help after exhausting their own resources.

ii) **Conflicting Self**: Youth find themselves in conflict, as their continued criminal involvement does not align with their preferred sense of self. During this stage, youth will minimize their contact with family, and will rationalize their criminal activities. Youth are more knowledgeable about the criminal justice system, and their aim is to primarily fulfill any requirements (i.e. of probation orders), making their help-seeking pattern selective.

iii) **Shady Self**: Youth have convinced themselves that they are leading a criminal life and have become more confident with this sense of self. During this stage, youth have alienated their family members, who have accepted that their children are criminals and adopted an indifferent

attitude. Youth are focused, then, on developing the knowledge and skills required to succeed in the criminal world and are passive towards seeking any outside help.

iv) **Reclaimed Self**: Youth are determined to restore the sense of self they had prior to their involvement in the criminal justice system but are still navigating difficult feelings. During this stage, youth are reconnecting with their family members, and are focused on keeping their criminal career at bay. Youth and their families are selective in their help-seeking but understand the importance of collaborating with helping professionals.

b) Promising Practice Model

The authors outline guiding principles for addressing the causes of criminality:

i) **Conduct cultural sensitivity auditing of the policies and operations of youth-serving institutions and organizations**. This practice can be used to address perceived blocked opportunities (discrimination, impoverishment).

ii) **Acknowledge within group differences to be attentive to specific needs and concerns (for example, of Cantonese-speaking vs. Mandarin-speaking youth and families)**. This could also include being aware of the unique status of newcomer youth, or international students. These practices can address the specific acculturation stresses experienced by Chinese youth.

iii) **Target the entry point of intervention to align with the level of criminal involvement**. This practice can address access to criminal opportunities. Interventions should be designed to include and engage family (and significant others) and should be practical and outcome-oriented.

iv) **Strengthen support systems and strive for cross-sectoral collaboration**. This can include developing social service networks and engaging families at different stages of interventions. These practices can address the lack of adequate support systems, especially for international students.

Finally, the authors outline **10 recommendations for systemic change** to support Chinese youth in conflict with the law:

i) **Collect disaggregated race-based data**.

ii) **Support youth to develop a strong cultural self-identity** to work against acculturation stresses and the internalization of the causes of criminal behaviour.

iii) **Recognize within group differences** due to demographic changes within Chinese communities.

iv) **Be critical of the concept of the model minority**, the “impression among service providers that Chinese youth are respectful and are high achievers academically” (p. 46), as these assumptions can result in Chinese youth being neglected.

v) **Bring attention to mental health issues** within Chinese communities.

vi) **Uphold the legal rights of Chinese youth** and be aware of the ways in which **they may be pressured by parents to plead guilty**, even when they are not, in order to be placed in diversion programs.

vii) **Coordinate services among various systems** (education, social services, and criminal justice) to address and support the unique needs of international students.

viii) **Match the cultural background of the service provider to the cultural background of the service user**; if the provider is also a newcomer, they should be supported to understand the Canadian system and context.

ix) **Engage and involve the whole family** in prevention and intervention strategies, which should be practical and outcome-oriented.

x) **Coordinate services and supports** across sectors.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

This report addresses existing gaps in the literature, emphasizing the importance of **expanding definitions of evidence to include research, practice, and lived experience**; broadening our understanding of evidence legitimizes the experiences and anecdotes of youth and their families, as this report does in order to amplify these critical voices.

Culturally competent youth workers must be able to respond to the specific needs and concerns of diverse youth and their families. **Ensuring that staff reflect the diversity of the youth and communities** being served by different programs is critical.

As this report demonstrates, evidence-based programming must also be **strength-based**, and **culturally-sensitive and responsive**. Youth programs must be **community-based and contextual, utilizing multiple approaches**. Sector stakeholders **must not approach working with a young person in isolation**; for Chinese youth in conflict with the law, **the family must be considered wholly** in prevention and intervention strategies.

Echoing stakeholders across Ontario’s youth sector, this report also calls for **disaggregated race-based data**. The absence of this data impedes the provision of appropriate prevention and intervention services and programs, because the reasons for the involvement of racialized youth in the criminal justice system – and the responses that may best serve these youth – will vary. Youth workers must also be aware of, and attuned to, within-group differences. Therefore, additional data is required to understand the different needs and experiences of youth in conflict with the law.



Kwok, S.M., & Tam, D.M.Y. (2018). *Identifying promising practice for Chinese youth in conflict with the law in Canada*. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary.

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<https://acrossuhub.com/2018/publication/chinese-youth-report/>