Cross-Over Youth Project: Navigating Quicksand

"Adult allies with cross-over youth need to be unconditionally supportive, trauma-informed in their practice, able to respectfully pace relationships with these youth, always anti-oppressive in their approach and interactions, and able to accept each young person for their unique abilities and perspectives" (p. 13).

1. What is the research about?

Young people involved in both the child welfare and criminal justice systems (dually-involved or **cross-over youth**) face unique challenges during their interactions with the police and courts. This report outlines the findings of the Cross-Over Youth Project, a four-year pilot project that set out to implement and evaluate a range of best practice options aimed at improving outcomes for cross-over youth in Ontario. The project had three main goals:

- To keep youth out of the criminal justice system;
- To facilitate getting youth who become involved with the police or courts out of the justice system, including detention, as soon as possible; and
- To facilitate the provision of children's services instead of a reliance on the justice system to access resources.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place at four sites in Ontario: Toronto, Belleville, Thunder Bay, and Brantford. These sites were chosen to capture a variety of community and court cultures. *(Site-specific reports are available through the Cross-Over Youth Project.)*

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about cross-over youth and the service providers in their lives. At the Toronto and Belleville sites, 48 cross-over youth were followed, aged 12-17, and half were racialized.

4. How was the research done?

A Provincial Steering Committee (with members representing 10 service sectors) undertook a **needs assessment** to gather information about the roles of stakeholders in the lives of cross-over youth, develop forward-looking recommendations, and educate relevant service sectors about the unique issues impacting cross-over youth.

All sectors identified "the tendency for service providers to work in silos, which resulted in multiple contradictory case plans created for dually-involved youth" (p. 9). As a result, **intersectoral coordination and collaboration** was prioritized at each site, where a multi-sectoral steering committee was created, and cross- and inter-sectoral training were offered at the introduction of each pilot in the four communities. To address case-specific and system-level challenges, **a case conference facilitator** was hired for each site, and facilitation was provided within the youth court and the community. The facilitators took a relational approach to mitigate resistance from frontline workers, who often lacked the time and resources to provide the care needed by cross-over youth, and to build "trust, respect, reciprocity, and mutuality" (p. 13) with youth, service providers, stakeholders, and steering committees. Each site also formed a Youth Advisory Committee so that youth with lived experience could advise the local steering committees and staff. In order to promote coordinated and integrated service delivery, **protocols were developed and applied**.

An **evaluation component** was included in the design and implementation of the project in order to identify and develop "innovative alternatives to existing policy and practice" (p. 10).

The project team conducted an **in-depth analysis** of 48 cases involving cross-over youth in Toronto and Belleville. Sources of data across all four sites included case notes, discussions with case conferencing facilitators, observations, Provincial Steering Committee meetings, Sub-Committee meetings, one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders, Youth Advisory Committee meetings, team meetings, and case consultations.

5. What are the key findings?

Five salient themes speak to the experiences of cross-over youth:

Trajectory from Family Home into Criminal Justice System: Young people enter the child welfare system for a number of reasons, and these reasons do not predict their involvement with the criminal justice system. Many youth receive their first charge in out-of-home care, where expressions of trauma are routinely criminalized. The authors argue that punitive practices within the child welfare system are "setting young people up to fail" (p. 19).

Navigating the Justice System: The culture within the police, Crown Attorneys, and Defence Counsels contribute to the increased involvement of youth from the child welfare system in the criminal justice system. The following were identified as key issues:
- The reluctance of the police and Crown Attorneys to use their discretion to divert matters away from the justice system (i.e., to give youth consecutive 'chances'); specifically, police are "the primary responders to conflict, and the decisions they make set in motion a cascade of consequences" (p. 31).
- Standard, restrictive bail conditions that do not acknowledge the needs or trauma of young people in child welfare and set these youth up to re-offend, leading to further entrenchment in the system.
- Placement instability, which influenced decisions regarding bail and contributed to unnecessary time in pre-trial detention.

Indigenous Youth: Findings from the Thunder Bay site reveal that Indigenous youth are removed from their home communities in the far north and sent to areas in Southern Ontario to live in group care settings in majority white communities. Separated from their families, language, and culture, they are then criminalized for behaviour caused by this attachment rupture and dislocation.

Black and Racialized Youth: Black youth are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, and experience structural barriers and embedded systemic oppression that over-criminalizes their behaviour. They acquired more severe charges in out-of-home care and more administrative charges, and spent more time in pre-trial detention as compared to both white and Indigenous cross-over youth. Decision-making processes did not consider the diverse histories of racialized youth, as stakeholders lack an anti-oppressive lens to engage with the complex trauma of these young people.

The Impact of a Lack of Youth Centering: In the majority of cases, stakeholders failed to centre youth voices and foster meaningful youth engagement. Peer mentoring was found to be effective in engaging and giving hope to cross-over youth.

The project team identified the ways in which young people with lived experience were triggered in their work with adult allies on the project, and how these youth "demonstrated their total lack of trust and overt animosity towards those representing these institutions, systems, or, for that matter, any kind of authority" (p. 13), as a result of "histories of trauma and loss … feelings of pain, frustration, betrayal, and powerlessness" (p. 13). Therefore, **three essential pillars of care** were facilitated by the project:

Youth Centering: Practitioners must recognize youth as experts of their own lives, and facilitate voice and meaningful participation.

Anti-Oppressive Practice: Practitioners must be grounded in principles of anti-racism, inclusion, and equity, and recognize the intergenerational impacts of institutional power imbalances. This practice approach "requires stakeholders and service providers to acknowledge and rectify the ways in which they enable systemic racism and racial biases in their own work" (p. 15).

Trauma-Informed Practice: Practitioners must recognize that youth involved in child welfare have histories of trauma and neglect; trauma-informed practice encompasses an understanding of trauma, the need for youth to feel safe, the role of relationships, and the responsibility of stakeholders.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This research shows that **cross-sectoral collaboration is essential** for improving outcomes for cross-over youth in Ontario. **Early intervention** and supports that "foster **a wraparound approach**" (p. 19) can prevent youth from further engaging with the child welfare system, and potentially crossing over to the criminal justice system. In particular, the practice of **case conferencing** was found to be effective in reducing juvenile detention and diverting youth from the justice system. Frontline staff in the child welfare and criminal justice systems must take a **trauma-informed and anti-oppressive approach**, **centre youth voices**, and **foster meaningful youth engagement**.

Finlay, J., Scully, B., Eaton-Kent, M., Farrell, T-R., Dicks, P., & Salerno, J. (2019). *Cross-over youth project: Navigating quicksand.* Toronto, ON: Cross-Over Youth Project.

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