

RISING RESEARCHERS

A Newcomer Youth-led Participatory Action
Research Project

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2005 (year of the gun), FYI has played a very active part in reducing violence and increasing opportunities for young people. The organization always based its practices on an evidence-based decision-making process. Thus, in 2012, FYI conducted a community based research project called BLOCC (Building Lives On Community Cohesion) that gave 15 gang-involved youth in the criminal justice system the opportunity to outline areas where they lacked support. The challenges the participants identified are compounded by the lack of educational and employment opportunities for a majority of these youth. The outcome of this research was used to build the BLOCC 2.0 and, in 2014, FYI was awarded three years of funding from the Ministry of Justice (Youth Justice Fund) to test an expanded model of BLOCC 2.0 renamed Re-integrating the Socially Excluded (RISE). The expanded and strengthened RISE model uses an evidence-based wrap-around support model for youth (12-17) in conflict with the law, to increase leadership abilities and skills to prevent and intervene in youth violence. The program successfully supported more than 100 youth over the 3-years with intensive 1-on-1 wrap around support with focus areas around educational and employment opportunities, family well-being and reducing social isolation by improving their social networks (See Appendix C for full timeline of FYI's work towards youth justice).

RISE

The RISE program focuses on bringing change in emotion, thought, behavior and interaction that in turn will help youth solve or decrease the chances of future criminal activity. This is done through in-person bi-weekly one-on-one counselling services where trusting relationships are formed, which serves to disengage youth from anger and violence using models related to integrative complexity and cognitive reframing. This work is supported by our commitment to working with families and community together, using specialized training to provide youth with strategies to effectively manage their specific problem areas such as anger, family issues, abuse, and cognitive thinking. The focus of the RISE program lies within 4 pillars: Education, Employment, Family Well-being & Social Isolation Reduction.

RISE

Education: This is an important focus as many of the youth in this program are of school age. Generally, a high proportion of youth who enroll in the program find themselves out of school or falling out of school. Our focus on education ensures that they see the value in education towards their future goals and are able to work their way back to feeling like they belong in school. This is achieved through weekly tutoring sessions on site at FYI with tutor mentors, goal-setting workshops, credit recovery support, and exploring postsecondary options.

Employment: In partnership with youth-focused employment agencies, all youth of working age are supported with resume building, job search, and soft skills development. Additionally, they are supported to obtain internships and placed in job settings where they are able to enhance their skills.

Family well-being: It is imperative that the family unit is factored into the RISE model. All youth are under 18 when they enroll in the program, thus requiring parental consent for most programs and services. Furthermore, it was important to the youth who recommended the intervention strategies that their family and home-life be taken into consideration as it strongly impacted their decision making. Staff engaged with the youth participants' parents/guardians bi-weekly either in person or over the phone to participate in co-planning as well as to connect them with external support if required. Regular engagement with parents/guardians provides support and increases their understanding of youth issues, improves family communication between parent and youth and supports a healthier well-being at home.

Social Isolation: When young people offend, it is rarely on their own. Many youth in the program are gang-involved and it is important that their social network be broadened. Program participants are immersed in new and positive social groups by participating in the different leadership and recreational programs offered at FYI and partnering organizations.

RISE TO RISING RESEARCHERS

As the RISE program gained momentum and we continued to evaluate the data, we noticed that as the years went by, there was a higher number of newcomer youth as opposed to Canadian-born youth enrolled in the program. This discovery was not particularly surprising when one factors in that the York South-Weston serves as the first home for many newcomers to Toronto. However, the increase in newcomer youth in the youth criminal justice system and those involved in misdemeanor offences at school was hard to ignore. We wanted to do something about it; but what can we do?

We decided to do something that has always worked for us – ask the youth themselves! We wanted to provide the newcomer youth in the RISE program and other newcomer youth at FYI and the wider community the opportunity to identify the barriers they encounter as they integrate into their new home country. We received one year funding from Toronto Foundation's Vital Youth grant to conduct a youth-led and youth-focused Participatory Action Research (PAR) project on the barriers that may propel newcomer youth into illegal activities and/or the wrong crowd.

Thus came Rising Researchers – a PAR project led by newcomer and first generation Canadian youth residing in York South-Weston. The project provided an educational platform for newcomer and first generation Canadian youth to identify the issues they faced, translate them into academically recognized barriers and understand how these barriers are systematically created. They had the opportunity to share their stories and experiences as well as document the stories and experiences of their peers.

The first half of the project focused on teaching the participants how to conduct research and group discussions on several systemic barriers and individual issues they encountered throughout their integration period. First generation Canadian youth were included in the project as they expressed that they too share some experiences that may enrich the context as they are from households of new immigrants. This project allowed their voices to be heard and for healing to begin for most of them.

PROJECT DESIGN

The project was unfolded in 4 phases:

Phase 1 Youth Outreach:

To ensure that we executed the project with the right participants, we conducted a thorough outreach to partnering organizations, neighboring schools, and existing FYI programs. In order to remove barriers to applying, multiple formats were used to allow youth to state their interest in the project. Honorariums were provided to reduce financial barriers for interested participants. The first 15 participants who met the requirements and confirmed ability to commit to the project were selected. The requirements were:

- ❑ Age: 15–21
- ❑ Resident of York South–Weston or neighboring community
- ❑ Recent immigrant (later added first generation Canadians living with immigrant parents as they too feel caught between two worlds/identities).

Phase 2 Knowledge Foundation Development:

The academic jargons usually used to describe the challenges and barriers newcomers may encounter are unfamiliar to most high–school aged youth; this was the case for most of the program participants. The first part of the project focused on deconstructing some of these concepts and identifying specific experiences that were more accessible to the participants. For example, they knew that because of their race, they were presumed to only be able to perform at a certain academic level. They knew that the school administration treated them differently based on the way they look. However, they did not know that this was institutionalized racism. Additionally, the project participants learned about research and how to conduct research by conducting their own research. Most importantly, they understood the purpose of PAR and the impact their participation would have on their community. They understood that giving their voice to this research meant that changes will be made that they could benefit from, but most importantly, that other newcomer youth will benefit from.

Phase 3– Data Collection:

Once the program participants were more comfortable with their knowledge of research and research methods, they got started on collecting data. Out of a list of possible data generation methods, they chose focus groups and surveys. They surveyed 44 youth who identified as newcomers (migrated to Canada between middle school and high-school). The surveys allowed them to receive input from other youth to confirm the information derived from the focus group. (*Please see appendix for survey and focus group questions*).

Phase 4– Data Analysis:

To enrich the knowledge-gaining experience, the participants were involved in synthesizing and analyzing the data. This step ensured that their voices were not altered. The participants especially loved understanding how survey responses translate to quantitative data and how statements from their focus group discussions are grouped into themes to support a theory.

NEWCOMER YOUTH AND THE CANADIAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

New immigrants come to Canada in search of better opportunities and with the intention to make a positive contribution to their adopted countries. Sometimes, this dream is realized and sometimes it is not. The journey of integration plays a big role in how the dream plays out. Those who are marginalized or encounter barriers out of their control have a much harder time actualizing this dream; they risk being alienated or involved with the criminal justice system (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009).

The integration process is much more challenging for youth than their adult counterparts. It is at this stage that identity development takes precedence over all else and it is generally a confusing stage for most teens and young adults. However, when combined with migrating and integrating into a new country, the identity development stage becomes much more difficult and leaves the newcomer youth very vulnerable to negative influences, thoughts and behaviors. Unfortunately, there is limited research that highlights the challenges newcomer youth endure during their integration process as a result of “a prevailing assumption that few youth experience long-term adjustment problems in school and in the labor market when compared to adults” (Wilkinson et al, 2013). This prevailing assumption reinforced our goal to provide a platform or an avenue where newcomer youth voices will be heard.

This report highlights some of the systemic barriers and individual issues newcomer youth face as they integrate into their new home country. The report is supported by statements directly from the research participants that reinforces the general discourse.

INTEGRATION FOR NEWCOMER YOUTH

Individual barriers:

Journeying to a host country can have very different experiences for youth compared to their adult counterparts (Thomas, 2012). Uprooting and displacement create social boundaries and profound experiences of disconnections in relationships. Thus, newcomer youth may face isolation as they are without the social supports they had in their homeland and are left without the ties, such as family and friendships that assist with social inclusion. Social exclusion as a multidimensional process of progressive social rupture, detaching groups and individuals from social relations and institutions and preventing them from full participation in the normatively prescribed activities of the society in which they live. (Oxman–Martinez, et al, (2012). These experiences guide the youth's integration and impacts the rest of their life in their new home country. Fostering environments of social inclusion may provide experiences for successful integration into Canada for youth populations (Thomas, 2012).

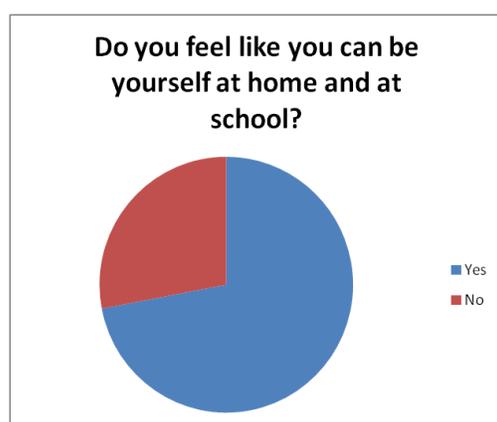
Some newcomer youth who suffer from mental illnesses are unable to disclose their condition for many reasons including their inability to identify that they suffer from a mental illness but also from the feeling of not having anyone to confide in. Program participants expressed that in most of their cultures, mental illness is not discussed or acknowledged. There is a lot of stigma associated with mental illness and none of them will want to disclose information about their mental health for fear of being stigmatized.

Additionally, the establishment of friendships is fundamental to positive youth identity development (Cooper, 2008). As adolescents work towards understanding who they are as an individual and against the backdrop of society, social inclusion and belonging is an important part of their identity development. Youth with close friends demonstrate better academic performance, lower rates of criminal involvement, and lower school dropout rates, compared with those who do not have friends as sources of intimacy and social support. Young people who are not socially well-integrated or who have negative peer influences report that they are less satisfied with their lives, less happy with their home lives, less likely to enjoy school or feel that they belong at school, and more likely to feel lonely and left out (Cooper, 2008).

Although making friends is imperative, it can also be a onerous process for some newcomer youth. There are newcomer youth who come from very rigorous cultural background with strict practices and expectations that are generally different from the culture of mainstream Canada. They are constantly trying to define themselves while attempting to make friends, fit into mainstream society and maintain their cultural/ethnic heritage. Therefore, experiences where mainstream Canada and the system discriminates against racialized newcomer youth, it holds a negative impact on the self-esteem of newcomer youth and forces them to choose one identity to belong to. Generally, they are forced to choose mainstream society in order to fit-in. This decision-making process can be an arduous one and research shows that perceived discrimination clearly and systematically increases acculturative stress and behavioral symptoms, and decreases self-esteem and life satisfaction (Cooper, 2008).

During the focus group, a discussion ensued where a participant stated that he feels like he is 2 different people. He explained that he constantly finds himself trying to appease his family by upholding his cultural and religious beliefs and practices. However, the fear that he will be ridiculed at school makes him act like a different person when he is out of his home.

“Sometimes, I even get worried when I’m walking down the road with my pants down and making a lot of noise with my friends. Because if anyone from my family sees me, I’m for sure done!” A Rising Researcher



A question from the survey administered by the Rising Researchers shows that 72% (32 out of 44) respondents did not feel like they could be themselves both at home and at school.

There are a number of individual barriers that newcomer youth battle with that makes their integration a challenging one without the addition of external/systemic barriers. These may not be the experiences of all newcomer youth as no 2 youth are the same; however, they are experiences and barriers that were highlighted throughout this research project by newcomer and first generation Canadian youth.



As newcomer youth try to identify themselves in this period of development, within a new country where their identity is not readily available to them, they find themselves pulled in many different directions. The Rising Researchers –in a discussion about discovering who they are and making friends– expressed that it is really difficult to figure it out. They find it overwhelming to live up to the standards their families have for them while trying to fit in with their peers. They don't think their parents will understand what they have to deal with and “*there is no one at school to talk to*” A Rising Researcher. Many of the participants attested to doing things their friends were doing just so they would fit in and not feel like they are weird.

“Sometimes you have to do things to forget about everything and relax. You know, get your mind off things for a while and not even care. Like you get high and stuff, cuz then you're like whatever. And I get a gut feeling that I shouldn't be doing it, but everyone was doing it. So, I didn't think it was a big deal” A Rising Researcher

Although the intention behind their actions are harmless, it nonetheless leads to a path of potential trouble. The pressure to conform in order to gain acceptance from peers is great and may also increase vulnerability to involvement in crime (Rossiter et al, 2009). Their vulnerability and limited information on acceptable behaviors allows them to be lured into activities that may be illegal or dangerous. The challenges that immigrant children face are often exacerbated by individual, family, peer and community factors that may leave newcomer youth vulnerable to victimization or recruitment to engage in illegal activities (Rossiter et al, 2009). With the odds against them and the chances of failure rising and little to no support or understanding available, the newcomer youth will find it far more difficult to integrate into the education system as well as Canadian society at large.

SCHOOL SYSTEM: POLICIES AND PRACTICES

One of the most critical factors in a successful transition into Canadian society is education (Rossiter et al, 2009). The education system is an ideal setting for the delivery of resources as newcomer youth often enter into the education system shortly after arriving to their host country, and thus it is able to provide newcomer youth a sense of direction (Deckers et al, 2012) It is in this space that newcomer youth spend most of their time, this is where they learn what it means to be Canadian, this is where they should feel safest. It is also where they should feel most supported. Rising Researchers participants unanimously responded in one of the sessions that they did not feel supported by their teachers or guidance counsellor:

[They] “feel that there is a lack of support in school and if you need extra help you are ignored and out casted” (Rising Researcher)

Naturally, newcomer youth look to teachers, guidance counsellors, principals and other authoritative figures to assess where they fit in and how to behave. They also rely on information from these figures to make decisions, especially when they come from a household where there may be limited understanding of the Canadian education system. Numerous elements such as teacher biases, economic inequality, and institutional or systemic discrimination act as barriers for immigrant youth in the attainment of equal educational opportunities (Anisef et al, 2000). Participants in this project expressed having a hard time saying no to their guidance counsellors when they are asked to take certain classes as they believe the counsellors know best. Similarly, in Chuang’s 2010 study on the settlement pathways of newcomer youth, one of the participants expressed a common experience among many newcomer youth. The participant expressed difficulty with understanding their guidance counsellor and resorted to answering yes for every question they were asked. This resulted in being enrolled in applied courses despite their desire to attend university after high school. This was a common experience from most of the Rising Researcher program participants.



New immigrant youth find themselves being convinced that being in the less academically challenging classes will be better for them. The literature around newcomer youth confirms that they are usually placed in ESL classes even when they speak and write English fluently, simply because they may have a heavy accent or come from a country where the primary language is not English. The misconception that all newcomer youth should attend ESL classes as a means of successfully integrating into the Canadian culture is detrimental to the positive growth and development of the students. Additionally, newcomer youth are strongly advised and often placed in lower achieving classes that limits their options in the future. One of the Rising Researchers (at the brinks of tears) explained the difficulty endured in their first semester at a Canadian high school. They were informed by their guidance counsellor, who had difficulty understanding their accent, that the student would need to be placed in ESL and applied classes so as to ease them into the Canadian school system. While this guidance counsellor may not have been acting maliciously, the experience of the student highlights a problematic issue. This Rising Researcher was a high achiever in their home country and spoke English fluently while having a specific passion for poetry. They unfortunately lost a semester trying to convince the school that they were capable of handling academic courses and planned to attend university. It was an enduring process for the student whose family could not provide additional support and advocacy due to work obligations; the result was the student going through this alone. The student expressed that they wanted to give up numerous times throughout that semester but is grateful for being able to persevere.

Very few newcomer youth are able to share a testimony like this. Many fall through the cracks as a result of the systemic barriers entrenched within the school system. “This environment has proven to be a negative one for newcomer students. It has led to poor attendance, fostered feelings of hostility towards school and produced an increase in delinquent behavior.” (Anisef et al, 2000).



Research has shown that key contributing factors are a lack of culturally-sensitive approaches and information that outlines how the school system works in Canada. Simultaneously, teachers and administrators face a lack of comprehensive information on immigrant family dynamics, expectations, customs and traditions (Rossiter et al, 2009). A participant gave an example where they felt that not everyone has access to the same resources as everyone else. They said that a lot of school work now requires you to use computers and a lot of students such as this participant do not have computers at home. They either have to find a library or just do not do their homework at all. These barriers are not taken into consideration and teachers have expressed to this participant that they believe this student is lazy and does not want to submit their assignment.

Another participant had the authenticity of their assignment questioned with the teacher stating that “it was too academic” for the student. The student had an accent and did not speak the way they wrote so the teacher refused to believe that it was original work. As a result, the teacher gave the student a zero because they thought it was plagiarized although there was a lack of proof. This student felt insulted and ultimately discouraged to make an effort towards school. This student dropped out of school less than 6 months later.

These practices and policies within the school system further serve to marginalize newcomer youth, leaving them vulnerable to bullying by their peers. “ESL programs may only temporarily deal with limitations to educational progress and special education classes may only serve to further stigmatize newcomer students in society” (Anisef et al, 2000). The Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) study considers bullying at the school a significant problem that prevents the integration of immigrant/refugee children. The more affected are refugee children and children from racially marginalized groups.

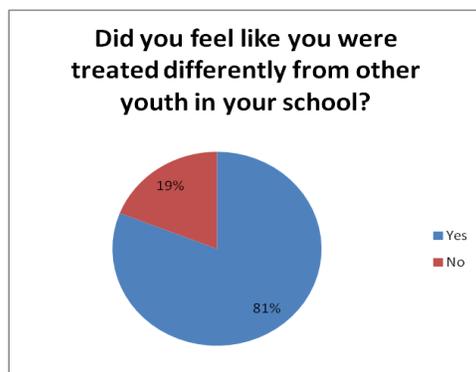
Physical violence in response to bullying in schools with zero tolerance policies, puts them at risk of suspension or expulsion. In a study by Choi and Lim (2014), newcomer Asian youth lost faith and trust in the education system because of the outcomes of their racial encounters that lead to their further victimization by the school and school authorities. One participant mentioned getting into a fight because of a racially charged bullying incident and was placed on detention by teachers who pretended to have difficulties understanding him due to language barriers. This provides a classic example of the lack of support available for racialized newcomer youth in institutions of education. It also sheds light on the fact that the lack of protection available within the school system leads racialized newcomer youth to believe that they must physically defend themselves from bullies. A Rising Researcher shared a similar experience:

“I have been here for six years and when I first started school it was tough. The school I went to was not diverse. I wanted to be part of the class so I started acting like the other students, being wild and causing problems because I wanted to fit in and be cool. I really wanted friends and it was hard. I got bullied a lot because of my accent and being different. One day another kid told me to get out of my chair and pulled my bag. I had enough and stood up for myself and in the end, I got suspended. Before, at that time, I just accepted because I didn't know what to do, who to tell and whether anyone would believe me and I felt like I had no support. At one point, I did not want to go back to school anymore”

These policies are highly criticized by immigrant/refugee parents. Parents note that often immigrant children involved in a fight as a result of bullying are disciplined, but not the student who did the bullying (Rossiter et al, 2009).

Racism within educational settings

For many newcomer youth, their racial identity was never a thing to be considered as they have always been around people of the same race. Most newcomer youth have had very little to no experience with discrimination based on their racial identity until their arrival in Canada. They are teased relentlessly by their peers and treated differently based on existing stereotypes about their race. Racist remarks and behaviors are perpetrated not only by their peers, but also by teachers and the school administration (Chuang et al, 2010). Many newcomer youths who participated in Chuang's (2010) examination of the settlement pathways for newcomer youth, expressed that they were distressed by the level of discrimination and racism expressed by their teacher, the school administration and the school system as whole. 81% of the Rising Researchers survey respondents felt like they were treated differently from other students.



“Education is considered to be a liberating force towards the equalization of opportunities in an ethnically stratified society; however, many studies have found that equal educational opportunities in Canada are limited for some ethnic groups” (Anisef et al, 2000). Race based discrimination within the school system was also identified as a barrier for the Rising Research project participants. Youth respondents recounted with sadness the direct experiences of race-based discrimination that they have faced or witnessed, often from teachers and people who are supposed to assist youth. Youth talked about being shocked, ‘hurt’ and ‘getting really mad’ due to these experiences of race-based discrimination (Shakya et al, 2010).

A participant's brother was being bullied everyday at school when he first arrived. He spoke to the teachers and principal, his mother did the same and absolutely nothing was done by the school's administration to support this newcomer youth.

“I will advice other youth to speak out about bullying and racism because it is not ok” A Rising Researcher

GANG AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

Gang and criminal justice involvement

Due to the paucity of research on the relationships between race, ethnicity, immigration, and crime in Canada, little is known about the rate of crime committed by members of racial and ethnic minority groups (Rossiter et al, 2009). Similar to youth crime, there is limited information or knowledge available on youth gangs in Canada. It is noteworthy that the varying/vague definition of “gang” in the Canadian criminal context adds to the issue of limited knowledge on the topic. Typically, police are allowed to refer to a group of 3 or more people engaged in illegal activities as a gang. Considering the information provided above around newcomer youth hanging out with the wrong crowd and participating in activities that they may not fully understand its implications; newcomer youth can easily fall victim to being labelled as part of a gang and end up being charged for a crime they did not even know they were committing (i.e. being an accomplice).

When newcomer youth are faced with multiple barriers and have limited knowledge of or access to resources for support, they are left very vulnerable to being lured into “bad company”. For newcomer youth, especially racialized newcomer youth, the aforementioned barriers work together to produce low self-esteem, poor motivation to learn and a higher desire to find like-minded people— those who also do not belong to the mainstream society. In this search for belonging, they could easily become involved in a gang, unintentionally. Their motivation for joining a street gang can range from seeking excitement and money to looking for prestige, protection, and a sense of belonging (Janhevich et al, 2008). Two of the Rising Researcher participants shared their story of being labelled as part of a gang without realizing they were in a gang. They were always out of the class as they did not feel like they belonged in the classes and were not motivated to try harder. When they skip classes, they usually see the same group of youth outside the school and they started spending time with those guys. One day they were walking in the hallway at their school and one of their friends pulled the fire alarm.

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They were called to the office and suspended, citing gang activities. One of them was on the verge of being sent back to his home country by his parents because of this incident. These young men did not identify themselves or acknowledge their participation in a gang, however, they were labelled as such and punished immediately with no support or an opportunity to explain. One of the participants felt like he might as well refer to himself as being part of a gang if that's how he is seen, whereas the other participant is still mortified by the manner in which things escalated. Both participants expressed that they wished someone would have taken the time to talk to them.

During one of the sessions, we talked about encouragement and empowerment. When asked if they feel that youth who are not encouraged or empowered through school, friends or family are more likely to be involved in criminal activities, all the youth present that day (13) said yes. One participant went on to say that “when a person is not encouraged and already has low self-esteem then they may do drugs, hang around the wrong type of people and then make wrong choices. When they do that they have a higher chance of getting in trouble from the police”.

Socially, racialized people tend to gravitate towards each other. When newcomer youth find themselves on the outskirts of the norm, they gravitate towards other similarly situated youth who are on the outskirts as well. Unfortunately, these racialized groups are also highly policed, especially in low income communities. “Certain immigrant/ethnic minority groups may be overrepresented in crime statistics because, compared to the native born, they are more likely to come under intense police surveillance (racial profiling), more likely to be arrested by the police, and more likely to be convicted and given tough sentences by the criminal courts” (Janhevich, et al, 2008). In one of the sessions where we discussed experiences with police, 100% of the Rising Researchers responded that they have been stopped by the police and 60% expressed that it happened more than once.

One participants said that they were upset that they were getting stopped. They explained that it is not fair that they are getting judged based on where they live, what they look like and what they dress like. They also said that they feel like the police labelled them as a criminal when they are not. Survey respondents who said yes to being stopped by police (80%), all said that they did not tell anyone about their interaction with the police as they did not think anything will be done about it. One of the Rising Researchers explained that they find it strange that they get stopped and questioned by the police in Canada, for no reason. This is new to them as police in their home country only interact with you when you are in real trouble.

“The first time a cop stopped me on the street, I almost cried man. I was so scared. I thought for sure they were gonna send me to jail. But he was just asking me questions about where I was going and my name and stuff like that. I didn’t understand it at all. And when I asked him why he was asking me so many questions, he got mad and asked me if I wanted him to arrest me. Man, I was so scared. But I didn’t tell anyone. Now I just hate cops and I don’t want them to talk to me” A Rising Researcher

Experiences like this shape the way newcomer youth interact with and perceive police in Canada. Many newcomer youth, especially racialized newcomer youth who find themselves in conflict with the law are victims of the system itself.

CONCLUSION

Newcomer youth migrate at a time in their lives when most young people are enduring the process of self-discovery and identity formation. The importance of security and social support during this process is crucial for youth who are in their home country where their identity may be mainstream. However, it is far more necessary to provide support, safety and security for racialized newcomer youth who are going through this phase of adolescents in a foreign place where they most likely do not identify with the dominant race/culture. The education system is generally where newcomer youth have their first access to integration and settlement opportunities. However, institutional barriers prevent the acknowledgement of the diverse needs of newcomer youth during the integration, instead they further isolate and marginalize them at such a critical point in their life phase. This experience changes the way racialized newcomer youth interact with society and generally pushes them so far out the margins that they cling to the first option of acceptance they are offered. Some defer to people of similar racial/ethnic background who may have encountered similar racially charged experiences and may harbor a distrust of mainstream society and act out as a result. With the vague definition of gang memberships, many racialized newcomer youths who find themselves in this predicament can easily be identified and profiled as a gang member. Alternatively, there are racialized newcomer youth who are pushed out of the school system and with little to no experience to compete in the labor market, are left with very little choice other than partaking in illegal activities to survive.

They are further marginalized by their encounters with the police and the criminal justice system. Their unfamiliarity with the system increases their chances of offending and often re-offending shortly after.



Because schools have extended contact with youth, the most critical needs of this population should be met there. There is certainly more to be done in relation to the research of newcomer youth involvement in criminal or gang activities, however, with the little information that is available, it is clear that the education system plays a dominant role in the successful integration of newcomer youth and must take great consideration of their individual needs to effectively accommodate them and ensure that they are well settled. In developing integration strategies and programs for newcomer youth to successfully navigate the education system, it is essential to consider the fact that newcomer youth are not a homogenous group, but rather a diverse group who experience challenges during the process of integration into a new education system (Decker et al, 2012). Only when this consideration is prioritized will the needs of newcomer youth be met by the education system. This will reduce the potential of racialized newcomer youth being criminally/gang involved.

Additionally, the information in this report and other reports that discuss the lack of support for newcomer youth should serve as a nudge to the immigration sector that a new strategy that includes migrating youth needs to be created and implemented. Newcomer youth will most likely spend a longer period of their life in Canada and contribute largely to the economy once they are employed. It is thus imperative that they are invested in when it counts.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM RISING RE-SEARCHERS

The Rising Researchers recommended the following actions be implemented to better support newcomer youth.

- Immigration

In regards to the immigration process, the participants felt like they were treated like they did not matter. No one spoke to them throughout– they only spoke to their parents. They wished that there was a requirement to enroll all newcomer youth in a program that supports their integration by explaining how things are different in Canada. The participants suggest that the government create a roster of newcomer serving organizations in each area and refer families to these organizations when they arrive in Canada. Additionally, they recommend that all school-aged newcomer youth should be required to participate in a program that supports newcomers in their community within the first 6 months of arrival. They wished they had been given the chance to speak with someone who understood their language and culture and can help them understand Canada from that perspective. They felt like this would have made a big difference on how they felt at school and the decisions they made. The participants feel that if there were more programs that provided support like this one then less people would have conflict with the law.

- Education

In regards to the education system, they must accommodate the growing diversity of the student population and offer curricula and programs that are relevant to their experiences, learning needs and aspirations. It is essential that an effort be made to understand the traditions, learning aptitudes, family structures and moral values of immigrant and refugee youth in order to develop programs designed to meet their educational needs (Lam, 1994: 127). The Rising researchers echoed this request by stating that the teachers need to be more sensitive to their different cultures, religions and ethnic backgrounds. The teachers need to be able to empower and support newcomer youth into making better decisions. Racialized newcomer youth should not be further marginalized by assumptions and racist reservations held by teachers— each student should be treated as an individual and not as a member of a racialized group. They also suggest having equal punishment in the school no matter the race, gender, etc. They feel Black youth are judged at higher rates and given a tougher punishment compared to a white person who has done the same thing. They recommend the use of restorative justice circles to resolve conflict in school as this method gives them the platform to express themselves fully.

The participants think sending newcomer students to ESL classes is the easy way out for teachers who do not want to deal with understanding the diversity of accents and mannerisms. They suggest that each school should have a program or a club where newcomer youth are paired with Canadian born youth for peer-support. They believe that a program like this would have given them an opportunity to make friends easily within a safe space, while learning about Canadian culture and practices. It will be far more effective than sending everyone to ESL as a way to integrate— you can't integrate when everyone around you is experiencing the same issue.

They also suggest that schools should have specific guidance counsellors for newcomer youth who understands how to effectively support newcomer youth and their parents.

- Policing

In regards to policing, the participants suggest a sensitivity training around different cultures and ethnic backgrounds and how to interact with them. “They should have knowledge and have had the right training before working with diverse groups” A Rising Researcher. They believe that the judicial system could be a bit fairer in regards to how newcomer youth are treated and charged. Should a newcomer youth come in conflict with the law, extra steps should be taken to discuss how their actions are against the law. If they are simply charged and left to navigate the courts on their own, there is a higher likelihood they will re-offend again as no real lessons were taught the first time around. Additionally, they believe that there is a need to support communication with the parents after their child has been arrested and charged. Many youth feel more alone when their parents do not fully understand what happened and think the worse of them. If the parents are made to understand and given the tools to support their children, they will feel less alone and more loved and supported.

NEXT STEPS FOR FYI

From the research, it is evident that newcomer youth need additional support than they are being provided. As an organization (especially one that supports newcomer youth), we feel it is necessary for us to make some changes and do our part in addressing some of these gaps.

Our first step is to pilot the program suggested by the Rising Researchers. They recommended a program where newcomer youth are paired with a Canadian youth who will help ease their integration. Although their suggestion is to have this program in the school, we will start within FYI and develop a strong model that will then be adapted for a school setting. In addition to pairing the youth, we will also host bi-weekly sessions where we discuss different topics around life in Canada, the differences with the Canadian system and their home country– including legal and education systems, social life, programs, job search and other topics. It will be a safe space for newcomers where they can talk, connect with others, build relationships, and discuss various topics. The program will also incorporate a youth-led approach, allowing newcomer youth and Canadian-born youth to develop leadership skills. The model will be tested and evaluated over the period of 1 year before being shared with stakeholders. The Rising Researchers will support the curriculum development to ensure that their input is not misrepresented.

Additionally, we will provide extra supports to newcomer youth who find themselves in conflict with the law. Our focus will be in ensuring that they are able to safely navigate the judicial system (language support, adult representation during court appearances, obtaining legal aid, etc), understanding what they did wrong and how to avoid re-offending, re-integration into the school system with better supports and parent engagement to advocate for additional supports at home. We will work closely with our neighboring police stations to provide support to the newcomer youth they encounter.

We believe that the aforementioned steps can be implemented within a short period of time and will have outstanding outcomes for newcomer youth. We hope to provide an update within a year, on the progress we have made. Stay tuned!

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APPENDIX A: YOUTH SURVEY

1. Are you between the ages of 13 and 17?

Yes____ No____

2. Are you a child with immigrant parents? If yes, skip to question 7.

Yes____ No____

3. Are you a newcomer to Canada?

Yes____ No____

4. If yes, did you receive any support directly when you were moving to Canada?

Yes____ No____

5. Did you feel lost at school when you arrived?

Yes____ No____

6. Did you receive any support from the school to help you settle?

Yes____ No____

7. Do you feel you can be the same person at home and at school?

Yes____ No____

8. Do you feel supported in your school?

Yes____ No____

9. Do you think your teachers teach you the way you want to be taught?

Yes____ No____

10. Does your school teaching staff have any visible minorities?

Yes____ No____

11. Does our school have any youth empowerment activities?

Yes____ No____

12. Have you faced discrimination in School? If yes, please explain?

Yes____ No____

Explain_____

YOUTH SURVEY

13. Have you ever been racially profiled by a teacher/s?

Yes____ No____

14. Do you feel supported in your community?

Yes____ No____

15. Are you a visible minority?

16. Do you feel like you are treated differently at school from other students?

Yes____ No____

17. Have you ever been unnecessarily stopped by the police?

YES ____ NO____

18. Did it happen more than once?

Yes____ No____

19. Did you tell anyone about this experience?

Yes____ No____

20. If you did, do you think anything would have been done about it?

Yes____ No____

21. Do you know more than 5 people who have been unnecessarily stopped by the police?

Yes____ No____

22. Have you ever witnessed a police officer abusing authority? If so what happened?

Yes____ No____

23. If you happened to see a police officer doing something they're not supposed to would you report it and why or why not?

Yes____ No____

APPENDIX B: Youth Focus Group 1

Rising Researchers Focus Group Questions

1. Have you ever been racially profiled? If yes, share an example.
2. What do you think of the police? What are the words, names and feelings that come to mind?
3. Have you been stopped by the police? If yes, has it happened more than once?
4. How did you feel about it?
5. Do you know why they stopped you or whether there was a reason?
6. Did you feel like you had support?
7. After your contact with the police did you tell anyone?
8. Do you know what to do when you are stopped by the police?
9. If you were in a situation and you needed help would you go to the police?
10. How could the Toronto Police force improve?

Youth Focus Group 2

1. When did you come to Canada?
2. How was your experience going through the immigration process? Were you alone? Was your family with you?
3. How was starting school?
4. Were you able to make friends?
5. Did you experience any racism by your peers?
6. Did the teachers provide you with enough support?
7. Did you feel welcomed?
8. Did they understand you?
9. Did your grade get pushed back?
10. How many grades did you get pushed back?

APPENDIX C: Youth Justice @ FYI Timeline

BLOCC Project
Developed
(Building Lives
On Community
Cohesion)

• 2012

Ministry of
Justice announce
funding at FYI to
launch an
intensive gang
intervention
program

• 2014

FYI launches
Rising
Researchers

• 2016

Youth Anti-
Violence
Taskforce
convened and
report delivered

• 2013

FYI launches an
expanded model
of BLOCC 2.0
renamed Re-
integrating the
Socially
Excluded (RISE)

• 2014