



# *From the Roots Up!*



**A REPORT BACK  
FROM THE YOUTH-LED FORUM ON  
BUILDING SAFE AND HEALTHY  
COMMUNITIES  
JUNE 2006**



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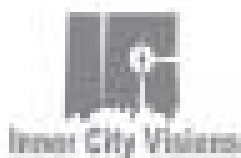
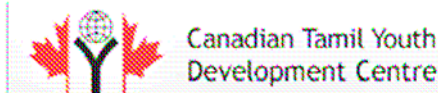
Artwork contributed by: Bones

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*Rathburn Area Youth (*

## The Grassroots Youth Collaborative

The Grassroots Youth Collaborative (GYC) was formed in May 2004 to advocate for policies that empower young people to have a voice and contribute to their communities. We are a collective of culturally and racially diverse youth-led organizations that work in underserved, at-risk communities where violence, especially youth violence, is regularly in the media spotlight.

The programs delivered by our members reach out and engage young people who are typically missed by more mainstream youth programming. Three of our member organizations have had program participants shot and killed over the past few



months, and we believe it is critical that the broader Toronto community look to young people to gain a better understanding of the reasons behind the violence, the impact it has on our communities, and our ideas on what can be done to reduce it.

Particularly distinguishing GYC member organizations from other youth-serving agencies is our youth-led governance and decision-making structures

which constitute a chief criterion for inclusion in the collaborative. These structures place youth at the centre of service provision, program development, administration and evaluation.

Member organizations are further bound by service provision to marginalized, racialized, and 'at-risk' communities in the Greater Toronto area who are traditionally excluded/turned off by mainstream youth programming. This programming engages youth in areas of the city that have a severe lack of social infrastructure especially as it relates to issues facing racialized youth, immigrant/refugee youth, economically marginalized youth and youth that have been criminalized by the Canadian justice system.

## Who Are the GYC?

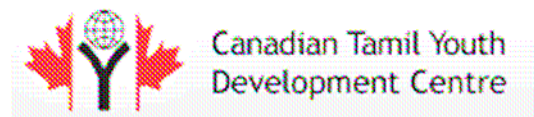
The GYC is comprised of member organizations. To become a member of the GYC an organization must: (1) be not-for-profit; (2) be based in the City of Toronto and must primarily serve youth; (3) be youth-driven, meaning that youth, between the ages of 14 to 29 are fully represented in all facets of the organization and account for more than 50% of all volunteers and staff. Youth must also be in positions of authority and must be significantly represented among board members; (4) be in existence for over a year and have an annual operating budget below \$300,000 (at the time of joining); (5) if connected with a "lead" or "sponsor" agency must have an organizational structure that operates at arms-length from this agency; (6) be community-based (regional or national groups are excluded from becoming members); (7) be committed to anti-oppression and anti-racism practices; and (8) be formally approved by the GYC membership.

As of April 2006, the GYC consists of seven member organizations including: 4Unity Media Arts Association (4Unity), Canadian-Tamil Youth Development Centre (CANTYD), For Youth Initiative (FYI), Inner City Visions (IC Visions), Rathburn Area Youth (RAY), Regent Park Focus, and Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT). Below is a brief description of the primary goal of each of the GYC organizations and the communities they serve.



***4Unity Media Arts Association***

4UNITY integrates life and job skill development with urban art forms to develop self-esteem, self-worth, creativity and tangible skills at no cost. 4UNITY is a youth driven media association dedicated to facilitating multimedia-based opportunities [audio, video, new media] for youth in Parkdale and across the Greater Toronto Area. [4unityed@rogers.com](mailto:4unityed@rogers.com)



***Canadian-Tamil Youth Development Centre (CanTYD)***

CanTYD is committed to empowering and developing Tamil Youth by utilizing the principles of advocacy, partnership, education, assistance and research. We seek to: (1) Provide role models to inspire Tamil Youth towards higher educational and wider employment opportunities; (2) Generate a positive image of Tamil youth; (3) Assist newcomer youth and their families to integrate with the Canadian society; (4)

Train Tamil youth in technical, leadership and entrepreneurial skills; (5) Empower and recognize the voice of young people; (6) Reduce and prevent violence among Tamil youth; and (7) Provide assistance for the rehabilitation of youth who have been involved in violence. [www.cantyd.org](http://www.cantyd.org)



***For Youth Initiative (FYI)***

FYI is a by-youth/for-youth agency that uses pop culture to bring critical theory and social systemic change to the streets of the former City of York, North Etobicoke and West Toronto. FYI attempts to provide capacity building opportunities to youth, through education, training and participation in other youth-related initiatives so they can more effectively act on their own behalf in systems change efforts, in attaining resources and in other youth related initiatives. [www.foryouth.ca](http://www.foryouth.ca)



***Inner City Visions***

Inner City Visions (I.C. Visions) is dedicated to using urban music and culture as an engagement and empowerment tool in South Etobicoke. Our mission is to build healthy communities by working with individuals through the arts. [innercityvisions@hotmail.com](mailto:innercityvisions@hotmail.com)

# Rathburn Area Youth (

## **Rathburn Area Youth (RAY)**

Rathburn Area Youth (RAY) works to establish services in the grossly underserved neighbourhoods of Central Etobicoke Capri, West and East Mall. We seek to increase and sustain access to programs, services and resources that address the priority needs and concerns that are identified by “at-risk” youth, on an ongoing basis.  
[cuttyd@lampchc.org](mailto:cuttyd@lampchc.org)

## **REGENT PARK FOCUS YOUTH MEDIA ARTS CENTER**

## **Regent Park Focus (RPF)**

Regent Park Focus is a community based organization that uses media technology as a tool to employ young people, enhance resident resiliency, bridge information gaps, increase civic engagement, promote health and effect positive change. We believe that information and media technology plays a vital role in building and sustaining healthy communities. Regent Park Focus is home to Catch da Flava on-line and community newspaper, Catch da Flava Youth Radio, E.Y.E Video Youth Productions, Zapparoli Studio for Photography.  
[www.catchdaflava.com](http://www.catchdaflava.com)



## **Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT)**

The Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT) aims to create and foster an inclusive environment where Somali youth and their families, work in partnership with other community stakeholders to address youth needs and issues and promote full participation of Somali youth in society.  
[www.soyat.org](http://www.soyat.org)



Photo taken as part of a Regent Park Focus photo project

**Contact the Grassroots Youth Collaborative**  
1652 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M6M 3W3  
[www.grassrootseyouth.org](http://www.grassrootseyouth.org)  
416.653.3311

## **From the Roots Up! A Youth-Led Forum on Building Safe & Healthy Communities**

In late December 2005, the Grassroots Youth Collaborative applied to Justice Canada for funding that would allow our collective the opportunity to create a space where youth in Toronto could come together to share their experiences and build a comprehensive action plan to address issues of violence in their neighbourhoods. Encouraged that the *Youth Justice Policy* section of Justice Canada was seeking out the voice of youth to help inform public policy and program development, we sought to hold a forum that would bring youth together from our diverse organizations and at the same time build partnerships with other youth-led initiatives in the city of Toronto.

Similarly we saw this forum as an opportunity to continue to build on the work we started as part of our funding through Canadian Heritage and the Multicultural Grant we received in 2005. Through this forum, we felt that we could effectively open a space of dialogue among marginalized and racialized youth throughout the city of Toronto in order to develop strategies for youth political/social engagement that are specifically centered in the lived realities of the youth who participate in our programming and encompass our staff/volunteers.

### **The Planning Process**

The planning stages of what was to become *From the Roots Up!* began in mid-January 2006 after confirmation from Justice Canada that we had secured funding to host a forum dedicated to enabling youth in Toronto to share their voices regarding violence in their neighbourhoods. Our first objective was to reach out beyond our own GYC networks to a range of youth-led

groups, initiatives and agencies that we felt should have an active role in shaping the forum. Due to the fact that each individual GYC organization has built significant relationships with various youth-led initiatives in the city, we were able to bring together a diverse group of young people to the organizing table. This group included youth of colour-led political advocacy initiatives like the 81 Reasons Campaign, the New Black Youth Taking Action (BYTA), Words Action Resistance (W.A.R.), Black Youth United, R.O.O.T.S.; youth-involved organizations such as SKETCH, Supporting Our Youth, Beatz to Da Streetz, the 411 Initiative, Project Not So Much, Respect In Action (METRAC); and also youth advocacy organizations like Justice for Children and Youth and Toronto Public Health.

In all (including GYC member organizations) over 20 youth initiatives came together to plan the forum and to build closer links in terms of learning about and supporting each other's work.

The coalition that came together began to shape the forum based on what we felt were some of the critical issues facing young people (especially young people of colour and other marginalized youth) in the city of Toronto. The title for the forum "From the Roots Up! A Youth-Led Forum on Building Safe & Healthy Communities" was indicative of the objectives brought forward in the planning sessions. Notably, the forum would develop based on three major theoretical premises: (1) from the roots up; (2) youth leadership; and (3) focus on the root causes of violence in order to build safe and healthy communities.

## ***From the Roots Up!***

The coalition agreed through consensus that the forum must be “from the roots up” meaning that the solutions, recommendations and actions coming out of the forum would be decided and discussed on a grassroots level. This also meant that the work, energy and organizing of the forum would be done within the marginalized and racialized communities that we represented as organizations. Within this context, we felt it was appropriate to limit the involvement of government/non-profit decision makers, youth workers, social service providers, as well as our peers in other cities. In doing so we felt we would be able to allow the youth participants to discuss their own experiences in the city and to start a Toronto-based grassroots process to address the issues facing our communities.

### ***Youth-Led***

The coalition expressed unanimous agreement that the forum should be entirely youth-led and based on a decentralized and democratic decision-making structure. This often required longer meetings but the result was a more unified and coordinated decision making structure based on the principles of self-determination, respect and dignity which we believe are significantly lacking from almost all mainstream (government, corporate or nonprofit) decision making models. Through this model our organizing meetings often consisted of twenty or more youth and young adults (between the ages of 14-30) who planned the direction of the forum, developed tasks for staff and provided strategic leadership in terms of what the objectives of the forum would be.

With this in mind nearly all of the staff salaries and resources spent on the forum were directly invested in young

people from the communities our organizations represent. This included four part-time coordinators; the young women catering companies (United Islanders and 21 Fine Somali Foods); t-shirts produced by a youth-led initiatives out of 4Unity; a documentary produced by a collaboration between 4Unity, Regent Park Focus and IC Visions; a crew of 10 spoken word artists, musicians and dj’s from a range of different youth-led groups; 13 workshops that were entirely by-youth/for-youth; and a website designed and maintained by young people.

### ***Building Safe & Healthy Communities***

The final criteria that was highlighted by the coalition as critical to the success of the forum was to make strong connections between incidents of daily individual interactions of violence in the lives of young people and the more structural root causes of violence in Canadian society. As such we felt it was imperative that the forum take an openly critical stand around issues of racism, colonization, homophobia, xenophobia, media bias, criminalization of black youth and the failures of the Canadian state (especially the justice system) in effectively building safe and healthy communities for poor, marginalized and racialized people.

In our experiences as youth-led organizations prior to this forum we were certain that any recommendations/actions that came out of the forum would have to be addressed “from the roots up”. This meant that we could not credibly call for recommendations in the current implementation of the justice programs and/or effective youth engagement strategies without first openly addressing how we (as young people) should work towards challenging these broader issues in an effort

to build long-standing healthy and safe communities.

### **The Location**

“From the Roots Up! A Youth-led Forum on Building Safe & Healthy Communities” was held over a two day period on March 24<sup>th</sup> and March 25<sup>th</sup> 2006. The forum took place in Toronto’s west end at The Lithuanian House located at 1573 Bloor Street West (at Dundas West). The location was specifically chosen for three important reasons.

First, it was on the subway line and would be accessible for youth coming from all areas of the city. Second, it was outside of the downtown core and would show commitment to building community spaces where our constituencies live. It was also noted that by setting up outside the downtown core we were emphasizing the differences between ourselves and larger mainstream organizations that merely use the inner suburbs as “satellite” locations rather than their organizing base. Finally, the Lithuanian House is a non-profit community-based initiative that supports immigrant and refugee communities (especially those from the former Soviet Union) and as such we thought it was an appropriate venue to host our forum.

Upon analysis the more institutional or corporate locations (like Metro Hall or the Sheraton Hotel) that were available failed to advance our mandate of grassroots community-based organizing and thus we settled on the Lithuanian House as an appropriate site.

### **The Forum**

*From the Roots Up!* brought together over 250 youth over two days to participate in workshops, discuss issues of violence in

their neighbourhoods, schools and media spaces, and develop a plan of action for building healthy and safe communities. Youth at the forum represented over fifteen high schools from the GTA, over eight universities and/or colleges, and a number of youth shelters and youth-serving organizations.

#### *High Schools Represented at From the Roots Up!*

Kipling Collegiate Institute  
Martin Grove Collegiate Institute  
Scarlett Heights Collegiate Institute  
George Harvey Collegiate Institute  
York Memorial Secondary School  
Stephen Leacock Collegiate Institute  
Cederbrae Collegiate Institute  
Winston Churchill Collegiate Institute  
Jean Vanier Catholic Secondary School  
Westview Collegiate Institute  
Albert Campbell Collegiate Institute  
Mary Thomson Collegiate Institute  
Middlefield Collegiate Institute  
Parkdale Collegiate Institute  
M.M. Robison High School (Burlington)

In addition to diverse representation from various school and organizations, the delegation of youth attending the forum were also representative of the racialized and marginalized communities in which GYC organizations are based. This included significant representation from: Scarborough/Malvern, Rexdale, Regent Park, Jane/Finch, Eglinton West, Parkdale, South Etobicoke, East/West Mall, Kensington Market and other areas labeled “priority areas” by Mayor David Miller.

The high representation of youth who attended this forum who are generally labeled “at-risk” is indicative of the trust, respect and long-standing relationships that the GYC has built with racialized and marginalized youth in our own communities. It is important to emphasize that one of the

primary reasons for these strong relationships is the fact that we (as staff and volunteers with the GYC) are demographically representative of the youth who participated in the forum.

*Universities and Colleges*

York University  
University of Toronto  
Ryerson University  
Seneca College  
Humber College  
George Brown College  
OISE/UT  
Queen's University

*Youth Shelters & Youth Organizations*

Second Base  
South Etobicoke Youth Association  
Toronto Youth Cabinet

This representation was made most clear by the fact that among presenters, performers, participants and organizers of the forum more than 97% were youth (between the ages of 13-29) and nearly 90% were between the ages of 15-24. Racialized and immigrant/refugee youth made up a vast majority of the participants and presenters at the forum with high representations from the Black, Somali, Tamil, Caribbean, East African, Arab, South Asian and Filipino communities. *From the Roots Up!* consisted of a series of workshops, spoken word performances, discussions, community lunches, and planning sessions that took place over two full days in March.

## **Workshops**

Presentations and workshops were coordinated by youth-led organizations based on issues they felt were important to address in the broader context of building safe and healthy communities in Toronto. Workshops ran throughout both the Friday

and Saturday and youth participants were given the freedom to choose which workshops they wished to attend. A brief overview of the workshops that took place at *From the Roots Up!* is as follows:

### ***First Nations Youth Panel***

The opening ceremonies and speeches of the event reflected on the realities of colonization and the occupation of indigenous land as being a significant factor in issues of violence in our communities. The forum then opened with a traditional Ojibwe drumming ceremony and prayer. This was followed by the first workshop which was a youth-based panel discussing violence in First Nation communities. The presenters of this panel were: Julia Valencia (Program Manager Dodem Kanonhsa, Cree/Ecuadorian Nations); Kerry Potts (Educator & Aboriginal Arts Activist, Anishnawbe Nation); Jean-Paul Restoule (Assistant Professor, Aboriginal Educator; and Gabriel Gaudet (Traditional Singer, Ojibwe/Cree Nations). This workshop discussed the many issues surrounding First Nations Youth including where First Nations came from and some of the origins of gang violence and drug/alcohol abuse in indigenous communities. It also addressed issues such as "Media and Aboriginal People" and growing up in bi-racial families.

### ***Making our Communities Safer for 'Queer' Youth***

This workshop discussed issues faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans youth in Toronto. The presenter of the workshop was ayden schein, a youth coordinator with Supporting Our Youth (SOY). The workshop challenged participants to think about where queer and trans youth fit in when talking about

building safe and healthy communities. The workshop also explored the connections between racism, sexism, classism, colonization, and homophobia.

### ***What's Love Got To Do With It?***

This workshop examined violence in youth dating relationships, including sexual assault, coercive sexuality, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and stalking. The workshop was conducted by Farrah Byckalo-Khan and Alana Lowe, representatives of Respect in Action (ReAct) a youth-based speaker's bureau of METRAC. The workshop allowed youth to discuss healthy and unhealthy relationships and how youth can be allies to their peers. Also the workshop built a broader discussion around issues of "Only Yes Means Yes!", sexual assault and date rape. More specifically youth in the workshop discussed violence such as partner rape, pressure to be sexually active, and the use of date rape drugs. The workshop also explored the impact of gender stereotypes and peer pressure on relationships.

### ***THUG LIFE: Hip Hop as a Political & Education Tool***

This workshop was centered around the realities of the day-to-day lives of inner-city youth' and provided information on how "at-risk" youth in the GTA have used hip hop and spoken word as a means to an income and as a means of building consciousness in their communities. The workshop was conducted by Spin who is a spoken word artist and the Vice President of Student Events at Ryerson University. The workshop contained short video clips from such icons as Hip Hop legend Tupac Amaru Shakur founder of THUG LIFE and former gang founder and peace building advocate Tookie Williams who was put to death by the state of California in spite of his Nobel

Peace Prize nomination. This workshop also demonstrated the way Hip Hop is changing the world and the lives of the youth.

### ***Film Production 101 - Creating Our Own Media***

This workshop introduced youth to the basics of film production including camera operation, sound, lighting and basic do's and don'ts! The workshop was presented by Tyrone MacLean-Wilson, Christiane Muabie and Adonis Huggins of Regent Park Focus and Sarah De Carlo of 4Unity Arts & Media Association. Youth who participated in this workshop were also invited to work with the film crew as they documented footage of the event and conducted interviews throughout the forum.

### ***Know Your Rights***

This workshop was an open space for youth to discuss issues around justice and policing. Gary Magee a lawyer with the street youth legal services for Justice for Children and Youth was the presenter. Youth discussed questions such as police discrimination against youth (especially youth of colour and particular young black men); how to file a complaint against a police officer; legal rights and information under the Youth Criminal Justice Act; and other issues prevalent within racialized and marginalized communities.

### ***By-Youth, For-Youth – What's Real?***

This workshop was an open discussion about the myths of effective youth services. The workshop was facilitated by Andrea Zammit, Kimani La Qua and a number of youth participants from For Youth Initiative (FYI). In the workshop youth discussed problems with mainstream youth programming and

suggested ideas for how young people can organize their own services, drop-ins and programs. Through this workshop members of FYI introduced the GYC grassroots youth-led community-based model of organizing and the challenges that face youth organizations. The presentation also touched on how FYI as an organization dealt with the deaths of Amon Beckles and Jamal Hemmings and the importance of effective youth-led programming in creating opportunities for youth to start building safer and healthier communities.

### ***A History that has Been Silenced***

This workshop used political theatre to focus on histories that have left out of Canadian history books and classes. The presenters of this workshop were Amanda Parris, Natasha Daniel, Muna Jimale, Pauline O’Kieffe and other members of the R.O.O.T.S. collective. Opening a discussion among participants as to the racism that prevails in the Canadian (specifically Ontario) history curriculum – the workshop focused on the story of Marie-Joseph Angélique, a Black slave of Portuguese descent who was hanged in 1734 accused of setting fire to Old Montréal. The interactive theatre presentation was part of a R.O.O.T.S. initiative to critique and propose alternatives to the current Ontario history curriculum.

### ***Books Not Bars! Stop the Youth SuperJail***

This workshop explored the myths and truths about the Canadian prison system, the impact of prisons and jails on our communities, the racism of the “justice system” and how we can fight back to stop the construction of a new \$81 Million youth super-jail in Brampton. The presenters of this workshop were Gabriela Rodriguez, Dayna Browne and Abi Salole of the 81 Reasons Campaign. Discussions in this

workshop centered around what was needed to build healthy and safe communities and how youth can create our own solutions to address the root causes of violence in the GTA.

### **The Jeffrey Reodica Community Room**

In organizing the forum we felt it was also crucial that there be a space specifically reserved for the sharing of ideas and for discussion. We named this space the “Jeffrey Reodica Community Room” after Jeffrey Michael Reodica a 17 year old Filipino youth from Scarborough who was shot dead by Toronto police on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004. In the room youth were able to obtain information on topics discussed during the forum, to discuss issues on a one-to-one level, to make use of art supplies, to be interviewed by our documentary crew or simply to take a break from the rest of the activities of the day.

Throughout the room were information tables from a number of the different organizations who participated in the forum and posters where youth could contribute to a discourse on issues of violence within their communities. This room was seen as integral in building beyond just a participant/presenter model and towards a grassroots youth-led empowerment model that placed self-determination and information sharing as central to youth engagement.



**FYI presenters posing with Bones, N’Kem Anizor from the new BYTA, Spin and Keith Sweeney**

The following section will contextualize the recommendations being brought forward by the Grassroots Youth Collaborative following the *From the Roots Up!* forum.

The focus of this section is specifically on issues that youth brought up with regards to their experiences with the Canadian Justice system as well as their experiences with respect to various youth engagement strategies. It is important to note that the information presented in this section and the recommendation section is derived from four key sources: (1) meetings and discussions with youth participants from each of the GYC groups during day-to-day programs and other more structured forums and workshops; (2) the experience of youth staff and volunteers from GYC organizations; (3) joint research on youth justice and youth engagement issues undertaken by the GYC (including the *Youth on Youth* report produced by Remi Warner of York University and the GYC in 2005); and of course (4) discussions and workshops that emerged from youth participants during the *From the Roots Up!* forum.

For a clear majority of the young people who participated in the forum (and who participate in programs run by the GYC member organizations) issues of violence in their daily lives are clearly linked to larger structural issues of violence that permeate their lived realities.

While many of the young people who attended the forum were concerned with increasing gun violence, they discussed these issues within the context of the fear of consistent and increased police harassment and abuse, racist comments by teachers and other authority figures, ill-treatment from mainstream social service providers, job-

search outlets that are more interested in placing them in a McDonald's job than supporting their creativity or business ideas, an education curriculum that speaks little of their histories, and of course media perceptions that make them seem like violent and dangerous thugs. This section raises many of the issues facing racialized and marginalized youth in Toronto.

### **The Justice System**

“I don't understand why the government keeps giving money to us to have conferences about violence and at the same time they are spending all this money on jails and police and nothing on stuff that would really help us. Most of the kids getting shot are young, poor, Black men but like they make it out to be some big gang conspiracy or something – s\*\*t all those kids are trying to do is make some money. We don't need any more talk or any more police – we need jobs, opportunities, stuff to do, ways to make money that isn't hustling...”

– *participant, From the Roots Up!*

There seems to be an overriding conception among decision-makers that the way to address issues of violence in our communities is to “get tough on crime” – this rhetoric is present throughout the political spectrum with candidates and leaders from the NDP, Liberals and Conservatives all calling for stiffer sentences and more police. Most recently in the Throne Speech brought forward by the new Conservative government, it was announced that the government would “tackle crime” and would “help prevent crime by putting more police on the street and improving the security of our borders” (Throne Speech, 2006).

These policy objectives are in stark contrast to what youth organizations (youth-led organizations and youth serving) have called for in terms of priorities in addressing issues of violence in our community. Youth

participants in the *From the Roots Up!* forum addressed two issues in particular with respect to their experiences with the Canadian justice system.

### ***Racism & Racial Profiling and the Toronto Police Services***

Youth participants in the *From the Roots Up!* forum consistently spoke about their experiences of racial profiling, disrespect and harassment by the Toronto Police Service as well as within the penal and justice systems. For young Black males being stopped randomly by a police officer on the street is a common occurrence and is consistent with statistics reported in the Toronto Star series on racial profiling published in 2002 as well as research conducted by professors Scot Wortley and Julian Tanner at the University of Toronto.<sup>1</sup> Youth also reported a significant degree of brutality on the part of the Toronto Police and spoke about how they themselves or their friends were often afraid to speak up about beatings they may have received at the hands of the Toronto police force.

Assault, abuse and murder within the criminal justice system were very serious topics that came up in a number of different workshops during the forum. The case of Jama Jama, the young Somali man beaten and punched in the face by Officer Roy Preston in 2003 was an oft-cited example of police brutality where the officer “actually got caught”; the 2004 murder of Jeffrey Michael Reodica, a 17-year-old Filipino youth from Scarborough was discussed by the youth in highlighting how “gun violence” also relates to the police. It was noted by one youth that “the cop who killed Jeffrey didn’t even get charged – instead he

got a promotion.” Indeed, the officers responsible for Jeffrey Reodica’s death, Dan Belanger and Allan Love, were cleared of any wrong-doing by the S.I.U. internal investigation and remain as staff on the Toronto Police Service.

One young black woman spoke candidly about how “the police always say this cop’s a bad apple or that cop made a mistake, but when they talk about Black youth we are *all* gang bangers, we are *all* thieves and drug dealers....I think the police force is rotten to the core...” In addressing issues of police harassment and racism, youth also were not convinced that programs that attempted to build “trust” with the police or programs to “strengthen relations” with the police were necessary or appropriate.

A young male of Caribbean descent who has experienced conflict with the police noted, “we just want them to stop harassing us, to treat us like human beings and not animals...we don’t want to play soccer with them or see them on every street corner in our neighbourhoods – we know that ain’t gonna make the hood safer...what might actually work is if you took a lot of the money the police get and invest it in community centres and youth programs and job opportunities...that would make s\*\*t safer...”

### ***The Prison Industrial Complex***

Similarly many of the participants of the *From the Roots Up!* forum expressed concerns with respect to spending priorities of government officials and decisions makers – especially as they relate to issues of “justice” and “community safety”. During the “Schools Not Jails” workshop conducted by youth from the 81 Reasons campaign, youth participants criticized the provincial government’s plan to build an

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<sup>1</sup> Wortley, Scot and Julian Tanner. (2003). “Data, Denials and Confusion: The Racial Profiling Debate in Toronto”. Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice. July 2003 45:3 pp.367-389

\$81Million youth superjail in Brampton, Ontario; increasing spending on police by \$45Million to combat “gang violence” and only \$15Million into a community fund spearheaded by Michael “Pinball” Clemons.



**Youth participate in a workshop by 81 Reasons – they do an activity that discusses youth incarceration**

One participant eloquently summed up the discussion in this workshop by noting, “Pinball was a good football player and all, but he doesn’t know the realities of our lives, he didn’t grow up here, I am sure he has good intentions but what does it matter if they give him \$15Million to spend...we probably won’t see that money...but the money invested in prisons and police – well that money is targeted for us for sure....”

Within this workshop each participant was given an opportunity to speak to how they would rather see the \$81Million earmarked for the construction of the jail spent, some of the answer included: youth-led job programs, more teachers, revamping of high school curriculums and new books/materials, reduction of tuition fees, child care programs, funding of youth organizations, breakfast programs, housing, address homelessness issues, build community centres. It should be noted for emphasis that not one person in the room suggested we spend more on police or prisons.

## **Youth Engagement**

Much of the planning of the *From the Roots Up!* forum was an exercise for the GYC in gaining a greater understanding on successful strategies for youth engagement. Specifically, it allowed the GYC to bring together a large group of racialized, marginalized and multi-barrier youth who have been criminalized and stereotyped to discuss how they could work collaboratively in an effort to build healthy and safe communities. It was also an opportunity for youth to discuss differences between mainstream engagement strategies and those being implemented based on community-driven and youth-led models.

During the FYI workshop on “By-Youth/For-Youth” many of the participants discussed how they felt isolated from both the education system and mainstream social service providers. Especially among racialized youth and youth living in poverty there was a clear sense that most “youth engagement” programs tend to simply use young people to legitimize the work of the organization or to dictate to young people how they should live.

A young woman of South Asian descent noted, “...I don’t like going to job search agencies or programs like that because they treat me like I’m stupid and don’t really respect me, but [the coordinator at CanTYD is someone I respect and she respects me and so I know that she really does want to help me find a good job...”

This was a sentiment echoed by a number of people in the workshop – that mainstream social service providers were very authoritarian, hierarchical and were intimidating spaces to be. A staff member of FYI emphasized that while her organization continues to provide informal job search services for participants, the city

saw fit to build a multi-million dollar Youth Employment Services (YES) centre in the neighbourhood, which many of the youth in the neighbourhood will not go to because that organization has not built any trust among the youth in the neighbourhood. This means that youth will continue to go to FYI when looking for jobs because there is a dialogical relationship of respect and understanding that has been built between the youth who are staff of FYI and the youth who participate in the programs. However, FYI receives no funding for the youth employment services that they provide.

Another particular issue to note was highlighted in the “A History that has Been Silenced” workshop where youth discussed the inadequacies of the current high school curriculum. Many of the youth noted that the current history curriculum (especially Grade 10 Canadian history) remains highly racist and colonialist.

One of the youth presenters of this workshop raised a popular point among the participants when she noted, “...recently School Trustees from the TDSB attempted to eliminate Black history month from high school curriculums and replace it with a watered down version called “Diversity month” but because of widespread Black youth mobilization we were able to stop them. But it makes you think...why is it that we receive eleven months of European history...no months of Indigenous history and only one month of the histories of the many people who helped to build this country?...” This was a recurring theme in terms of what young people saw as effective engagement.

“It’s an organization that takes different approaches to helping us understand who we are,” noted one participant. “It’s like my people’s history is an oral history, we come from a nation of

poets and in the old tradition, history was taught by poets traveling from city to city and neighbourhood to neighbourhood – using hip hop and theatre and stuff to teach our history is sorta I guess what we do...and it’s groups like GYC and ROOTS that get this...”, stated another participant.

### ***The GYC Methodology***

GYC groups are committed to four overarching ideas in terms of engaging the youth who participate in their programs, they are: (1) Self-Determination, Respect and Dignity; (2) Collaboration not Consultation; (3) a Culture of Creativity; (4) The Importance of Transportation. While each group’s practices may differ slightly, these main themes are consistent for each of the GYC organizations, and this was exemplified by their work in collaboration with other grassroots youth-led initiatives in terms of organize the *From the Roots Up!* forum.

### ***Self Determination, Respect and Dignity***

One of the distinctive features separating the youth-led organizations that form a part of the GYC and other more mainstream youth services providers is our focus on self-determination, respect and dignity in terms of how we work with youth participants.

In terms of self-determination, we believe that the goal of each of our organizations is to give participants the sense that when youth (especially the most marginalized youth) work together as a community and a collective they are able to achieve structural change that will have a long term impact on the well being of their individual and collective lives. This was exemplified during the *From the Roots Up!* forum through the fact that the food, t-shirts, music/entertainment, workshops, reporting,

documentary making, and coordination for the event was completed by youth (and primarily racialized/marginalized youth).

This was part of a broader goal to use GYC resources to support youth-led initiatives in all events and actions that we take on as a collective (and in our individual organizations). We see this model as being completely at odds with the “client-based” model or the “youth-involved” models that are prevalent among the majority of youth-serving agencies. By maintaining the same structures of authority and continuing to take away the decision-making power of youth, we feel that these organizations perpetuate a charity-based model that does nothing to solve the broader social problems that keep youth from marginalized communities from taking control of their individual and collective lives.



**Keith Sweeney, FYI Staff and City Councillor Candidate in Ward 12 poses with FYI participants at GYC forum**

In this regard, the GYC organizations believe it is essential that the street values of “respect” and “dignity” be at the heart of any engagement effort on the part of our groups. With this in mind, a culture of respect and mutual learning is shared among staff and participants as well as among participants from different GYC groups. Through our collaboration and especially through the *From the Roots Up!* forum, we have been able to facilitate

broader cross-community and cross-cultural spaces where youth from different parts of the city or from different cultures/races can come together to talk about issues of marginalization and how they can work together to build healthier and safer communities across those boundaries. This again is in contrast to some of the larger mainstream organizations that remain grounded in their “catchment” areas and do not address the broad issues of marginalization that cut across GTA communities.

Thus, our engagement strategy relies on the core understanding that individuals and communities should be able to live in dignity without stigmatization, racialization, criminalization and being the victims of a colonialist charity model of social work that has permeated social services agencies since their inception. This was critical in our understanding of how the forum should take place. For our organizations it was essential that the forum was accessible – so we spent much of our funds for travel on buses and TTC tickets to ensure that all youth could access the forum. We used the same hourly salary level for every staff person we hired, believing that no one person’s job is more important than the next in hosting the forum. We ensured that the forum was representative of the communities participating in it – this did not mean that we sought out “token” youth to facilitate workshops – but rather that we conducted workshops internally or with groups that have built longstanding relationships with our organizations and the youth who participate in our programs.

During the *From the Roots Up!* forum, the workshops that took place focused not only on issues facing racialized and marginalized youth in Toronto, but they also sought to advance solutions to building healthier and safer communities. Through this process as well as the GYC's experience working with the most marginalized and racialized youth in our organizations, we saw a trend in what young people themselves felt were effective solutions to some of the most serious issues facing our communities. Specifically, there seemed to be a strong consensus among the youth participants in the forum that: (1) **grassroots youth-led** organizations are effective; (2) culturally and artistically community-based programs are a very important part of engaging youth and learning about historical and social issues; (3) that appropriate mentorship, training and job opportunities should be done through youth-led organizations.



Helen Yohannes a spoken-word performer at the forum and Alana Lowe a presenter forum watch another performance.

### **Grassroots Youth-Led Organizations Are Effective**

Discussions in many of the workshops during the *From the Roots Up!* forum reflected on the effectiveness of

youth-led grassroots initiatives in providing spaces for racialized and marginalized youth to build skills, get involved in creative projects and to discuss issues that are affecting their communities.

One youth participant noted, "I used to do a lot of hustling on the street but since I've been working on my record at 4unity, I'm able to build skills and sell my records on the street...its sorta a legal hustle."

While this skill-building continues however, youth continue to face significant barriers and racial profiling from police. As

recently as February of 2006 GYC groups received reports of youth being arrested and harassed by undercover police officer while selling their self-recorded cds on street corners.

During one of the workshops a staff member of a GYC group noted, "we see that the youth-led groups are effective, because we understand the circumstances facing the youth we work with – but its also important to note that we can't just advocate for more funding for youth-led initiatives, we also have to talk about addressing the issue of too many police officers harassing and abusing our youth. Nothing is gonna change if everytime they spend \$15 million on youth, they spend another \$45 million on police!...It makes our work even harder."

The *From the Roots Up!* forum was an excellent example of how effective grassroots youth-led organization are at engaging youth in our communities. This forum was able to bring together over 250 young people from the most marginalized communities in Toronto, this is a feat that many organizations seek to make happen but cannot. In our organizing we never had to confront the issue of whether or not our

forum would reach “middle class” youth or “marginalized” youth or “white” youth or “youth of colour” because it was clear from the onset that the groups we represent, work with and have built trusting relationships with are overwhelmingly racialized and marginalized youth. This reinforced research produced in the *Youth on Youth Report* (Warner, 2005) which noted that service providers who were demographically representative of the users were more competent, democratic and effective. It also addressed the importance of having youth organization and programs run, developed and staffed by youth (especially racialized and/or marginalized youth) due to reasons of greater social proximity, familiarity and awareness of youth issues and interests.

### **Cultural and Artistic Community-Based Programs**

An essential component of the work of the organizations that form the GYC is the use of popular culture and the arts in attracting and engaging youth to youth-led organizations. It was also an effective tool for popular education, advocacy and civic engagement. The use of popular culture and urban arts was highly visible at the *From the Roots Up!* forum where youth used hip hop, popular theatre and video and media production as tools to discuss very critical issues of importance regarding violence, engagement and building safe and healthy communities. In the THUGLIFE workshop, participants discussed the importance of using the knowledges and traditions of racialized and marginalized youth to build social change.

Many rappers consider themselves educators and see at least a portion of their mission as promoting consciousness within their communities. The raising of critical consciousness through hip hop culture in people who have been oppressed is a first

step in helping them to obtain critical literacy and, ultimately, liberation from oppressive ideologies. The influence of rap as a voice of resistance and liberation for urban youth is a tool for social justice and transformation. Hip Hop is one of the few mediums that challenge dominant stereotypes and attempts to offer urban youth an alternative to ‘ghetto life’.

### **Mentorship, Training and Job Opportunities**

Along with cultural and arts opportunities youth participants reiterated the need to use the skills developed working with youth-led organizations to put towards employment and self-employment opportunities.

Many of the youth when asked who they saw as a “mentor” or “role-model” pointed to their peers who were staff of youth-led organizations noting that they believe in people who “are from the community, work in the community and work for the community...” The participants felt that youth-led organizations were the best places to meet mentors, get training opportunities and possibly to seek out employment or self-employment opportunities.

The largest barrier for youth participants is that the staff of youth-led organizations often do this type of work with them beyond their regular work time due to the fact that youth-led organizations rarely receive funding that would help support employment programs or self-employment programs or training. Also because most youth-led organizations are without core funding they often lack the resources necessary (both human resources and financial resources) to develop formal training and employment programs as part of their organizations.

The recommendations that appear in this section are a compilation of a number of different sources that had an influence on this document. First, the combined day-to-day life and work experiences of the staff, volunteers and participants who make up the organizations in the GYC is reflected in the recommendations through ideas, debates and discussion that occurred in a number of small workshops, meetings and forum within those individual organizations over the last decade.

Second, the recommendations in this document build on the recommendations that came out of the *Youth on Youth Report* published in 2005 by York University lecturer Remi Warner and the Grassroots Youth Collaborative. Third, the creative process that became the *From the Roots Up!* forum was an exciting space where discussions occurred across communities and beyond GYC member groups in an effort to build long-standing and effective strategies to address some of the most serious issues of violence, racism, poverty and isolation facing young people in our communities.



Spin addresses issues of colonialism and the shooting death of Jeffrey Reodica in his spoken word performance at the forum.

The recommendations, while targeted at certain departments, are interconnected and require examination from a number of government and non-profit sources if they are interested in implementing measures that would be long-standing and effective. It should be noted that while this list of recommendations is *NOT* comprehensive, we see these recommendations as being broadly connected and as such we feel it is important that each department look serious at implementing *ALL* the measures recommended rather than picking and choosing those that seem most politically feasible. We realize that each department and organization faces constraints and limitations in implementing policy, but we feel that it is critical for decision-makers to take the recommendation process seriously and honestly if they want to continue to build positive youth-led initiatives in the city.

## OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

The first section brings together four recommendations that we felt should be addressed to decision-making bodies as a whole. In our experience working with various government bodies and foundations we have often reflected on the isolation that exists between these bodies and feel that a crucial issue in addressing issues relevant to youth is a clear, transparent and effective system of governance that will allow youth to take a lead on policies that are directed to them. The recommendations in this section are as follows:

***1. Better coordination among all levels of government in terms of funding streams for youth-led initiatives. Focus away from youth “criminalization” programs and towards social programs that address issues of community self-determination; meaningful job opportunities; arts/cultural development; youth-led programming***

To ensure that youth-led initiatives are able to access funding opportunities in an effective and time-sensitive basis it is essential that government departments stream-line their youth funding programs. This would require a simple method of application, coordinated reporting processes and an emphasis on funding grassroots initiatives. The process of coordination of these initiatives should include youth-led organizations as partners in the development of the streamlined fund to ensure that youth are more than just consulted on the process. While a streamlined fund is important, we feel that funding of youth-led initiatives is most effective over the long-term if it is part of a general move away from funding enforcement initiatives that remain highly ineffective in dealing with issues of violence in our communities.

### ***2. Multi-year core funding for grassroots youth-led initiatives in the city of Toronto – streamlined process of reporting***

Grassroots youth-led organizations should be supported by a streamlined multi-year fund that provides core funding for staff, space and capital expenses. Groups like those who are part of the GYC remain significantly grassroots with all staff in the organization taking on responsibilities from applying for grants to running programs. Since most of the funding received by these organizations is currently project-based, a significant portion of staff time is currently dedicated to applying for grants or reporting on grants. Staff at youth-led agencies remain overworked and underfunded (even compared to other mainstream youth serving agencies.)

### ***3. Coordinated (Tri-Level) funding/subsidy program to open up buildings and provide cheap space for youth-led initiatives to develop and expand current programming***

To ensure that funding initiatives are able to meet the timely needs of grassroots community-based youth-led initiatives, funding programs should be coordinated among various levels of government and with different departments. This would ensure a simple application and reporting process that would help youth-led organizations to develop and expand current programming.

### ***4. Funding shifted away from mainstream programming towards smaller, community-based initiatives***

One of the key messages coming out of the forum was that larger mainstream youth services providers do not have the ability to effectively work with youth to build long-term, meaningful community-based solutions to issues they face in their lives. We feel that any funding priorities in terms of “youth” should be towards smaller, community-based youth-led initiatives that are representative of racialized and marginalized youth in the city; work from a model of self-determination rather than service provision; and build towards long-term sustainable change rather than band-aid solutions to social problems.

## **JUSTICE CANADA RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***1. Focus away from policing as a solution to solving issues of violence and towards holistic community-based approaches that focus on self-determination of marginalized communities).***

Youth participants in the forum (and GYC member organizations) believe that it is essential that any move towards supporting holistic, community-based approaches to addressing issues of violence

be accompanied with an equal move away from policing and enforcement measures.

We feel that these enforcement measures are inherently racist and classist and cause significant disruptions in marginalized communities. Also many studies point out that greater enforcement does not prevent violence, is not cost effective and often makes life situations more difficult for youth that have been in conflict with the law (including making it harder to find employment with a criminal record). Justice Canada should also support community-based safety initiatives that are independent of the Toronto Police Services or any other branch of enforcement.

## ***2. Build better relationships with youth-led initiatives, understand what is happening on the ground and what the needs of communities are.***

While formal quantitative research on the effectiveness of youth-led organizations in Canada is sparse, the *Youth on Youth Report* released in 2005 addresses the benefits of this method of organizing among youth. The report also calls for decision-makers to gain a better understanding of how youth-led initiatives work from day-to-day and to build more concrete and face-to-face relationships with these community-based approaches to youth engagement.

## ***3. Increase funding for youth-led initiatives by 30% over the next 5 years via “Youth Justice Renewal Fund”***

We feel that the Youth Justice Renewal Fund is an important step made by Justice Canada to addressing some of the root issues of violence facing young people in our communities. While one of the mandates of the fund is to “broaden the range and nature of community groups involved in the renewal of youth justice in Canada (e.g.,

education sector, arts and recreation; child advocates; mental health professionals; those in the helping professions)” we feel that it is imperative that youth-led organizations be among the most urgent groups to include in this initiative.

Since our organizations work very closely with the most racialized and marginalized youth in the city of Toronto and have built a trusting and long-standing relationship with them, we see it is imperative that this fund be directed towards our organizations. In light of the urgency with respect to youth-based community work, we see it is critical that at least 30% of the Youth Justice Renewal Fund be diverted to youth-led grassroots initiatives over the next five years time. It would be especially important if some of this funding was directed towards providing space for youth programming and providing core funding for youth-led organizations.

## ***4. Youth-led education workshops for Justice employees around media perceptions of youth (esp. Black youth)***

Increasingly we have seen interviews on mainstream media sources (CBC, CTV, The Globe and Mail, etc.) where officials in the Justice department perpetuate the stereotypes and hype around “gun violence” in Toronto. Depictions of racialized and marginalized youth in the media (especially Black youth) often carries significant racist overtones that perpetuate the treatment of Black youth in the criminal justice system. We feel it is critical for employees of Justice Canada to participate in ongoing training and relationship building with racialized and marginalized youth in order to gain a better understanding of the root causes of violence in our communities.

## ***5. Updated research regarding the ineffectiveness of punitive measures like***

***mandatory minimum sentences for youth offenders; imprisonment of youth offenders.***

The Throne Speech by the Conservative government and its priority to “get tough on crime” is seen by most youth-led organizations as a move towards a U.S. style mandatory-minimum sentence policy and an increase in the incarceration of “youth offenders”. This is highlighted by the construction of an \$81Million youth superjail that is contrary to recommendations from a number of inquests, including the Meffe inquest of 2004.

We feel that it is critical for Justice Canada to maintain updated research which shows the disparities and ineffectiveness of the proposed “get tough on crime” policies being suggested by all levels of government (Boyd, 1999; Free, 1997; Skolnick, 1995).<sup>2</sup>

***6. Use of youth-led organizations as an integral partner in “diversion” programs (either as prevention or with regard to youth already in conflict with the law)***

The *From the Roots Up!* forum underscored the fact that youth-led organizations work closely with youth who have been criminalized by the Canadian Criminal Justice system. As such we have become an integral part of the “diversion” process ensuring that youth who are at risk of being involved in the criminal justice

system have opportunities to build skills and discuss issues of importance and also a place to hang out and feel included after school. In addition, youth-led programs can also be part of the rehabilitation process for youth exiting the criminal justice system or who have already come in conflict with the law.

Since the decision-making structures in youth-led organizations tend to be grassroots, participatory, and democratic – youth who have come in conflict with the law and authority maintain a greater sense of ownership and feel better able to self-determine their future.

The Department of Justice and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services should expand funding of alternative models such as restorative justice approaches. The Department of Justice should implement the programs necessary to ensure that the Youth Criminal Justice Act is being implemented. Thus meaning, pre-charge referrals for first time offenders and/or restorative justice circles, instead of traditional post-charge referrals. By participating in these rehabilitative programs, the offender completes restitution to their victims. Also, through pre-charge referral diversion programs, the offenders provide meaningful service to repay the debt to their communities and upon completion has no permanent record for first-time offenders. Restorative justice holds the victim’s concerns as equally important to the process of administering justice and it allows victims a stronger voice and role in that process.

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<sup>2</sup> Boyd, Lorenzo M. (1999) “Sentencing Disparities: Renewed and Revised” *The Discourse of Sociological Practice*. Vol 1:2 (Winter).  
Free, Marvin D. Jr. (2002). “Race and Presentencing Decisions in the United States: A Summary and Critique of the Research”. *Criminal Justice Review*. 27:2 (Autumn)  
Skolnick, Jerome H. (1995). “What Not to Do About Crime – The American Society of Criminology 1994 Presidential Address.” *Criminology*. 33:1 (Feb).

time offenders and/or restorative justice circles, instead of traditional post-charge referrals. By participating in these rehabilitative programs, the offender completes restitution to their victims. Also, through pre-charge referral diversion programs, the offenders provide meaningful service to repay the debt to their communities and upon completion has no permanent record for first-time offenders. Restorative justice holds the victim's concerns as equally important to the process of administering justice and it allows victims a stronger voice and role in that process.

***7. Coordinate more closely with HRSDC, Provincial/Municipal bodies and youth-led organizations with regard to funding job/employment programming for youth participants***

“Building safe and healthy communities is more than just preventing gun violence.” This was the key message that came out of the *From the Roots Up!* forum. It is essential that Justice Canada coordinate any “safety or anti-violence” initiatives with providing job opportunities, revising racist education curriculums, promoting grassroots community-based organizations, addressing police harassment and brutality, etc. This requires a coordinated effort beyond one single department or agency.

**CRIME PREVENTION INITIATIVE**

***1. Better understanding of the root causes of “crime”. More hands on relationship with youth-led organizations.***

We believe that there is a drastic lack of communication between government “crime prevention initiatives”. We do not feel that it is necessary for youth to sit on more “police-advisory” or “justice-advisory” committees, but rather that government

officials take a pro-active approach to responding to the demands of the most racialized and marginalized youth in the city.

We see any approach to building healthy and safe communities as including policies that limit the amount (and work towards eliminating) youth incarceration; policies that work to provide job opportunities for youth; policies that would address the financial burden of attending post-secondary education; policies that would eliminate racist legislation in the school system like the “Safe Schools Act”; and policies that would focus on building self-determination through a by-youth/for-youth model of youth programming. This would require prioritizing crime prevention funding to youth-led initiatives that focus on crime prevention through alternative education, arts, & job creation.

**HUMAN RESOURCES & SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CANADA**

***1. More funding should be used to support youth-led organizations in hiring youth to work for the organization or to provide job search programming within the organization.***

One of the goals of the GYC is to provide job opportunities for the participants in our programs. This might be working with the organization to run programming or it could be supporting a youth-led initiative to develop their own employment opportunities. However, to do so we require support in terms of funding that would allow us to hire youth in an attempt to build skills and experience doing community work.

Participants at the conference stressed that mainstream employment programs are not effective at reaching marginalized youth. Most of the youth we work with have

difficulty finding employment opportunities because of race, class, education, criminalization barriers.

Youth-led organizations are a place for many of these youth to come to seek job opportunities or to get help finding employment, thus youth-led organizations also require funding capacity to provide these job search programs.

***2. An accessible fund should be made available to youth-led organizations to help support youth self-employment opportunities, especially opportunities that are grassroots and community-based.***

One of the greatest obstacles facing marginalized youth from building their own employment opportunities is the lack of capital, trust and confidence in youth-led community business initiatives from funders and potential supporters. IC Visions, 4Unity Media and Arts Association and Regent Park Focus are all examples of how community-based self-employment opportunities can be successful in giving youth chances to build their own careers and economic supports. We feel it is imperative that a fund be created that would be disbursed by the GYC to support youth-led community-based self-employment opportunities.

***3. SELF DETERMINATION A drastic increase in funding for grassroots youth-led initiatives that seek to engage young people in marginalized communities.***

It is critical that any employment strategies seeking to engage young people in marginalized communities recognize the value and contributions of young people to their neighbourhoods and to the economy and stop treating them like cheap and exploitable labour in a volatile service sector. Through strategies that emphasize

“self-determination” over “employability” we feel that youth can produce a more robust and community oriented youth-led economy that is both creative and effective at bridging some of the much needed gaps in community resources in their neighbourhoods.

## **CANADIAN HERITAGE**

***1. A 20-25% increase in funding directed towards youth-led arts/culture programming (especially those relating to “urban arts”).***

Nearly each one of the GYC groups is directly engaged in programming related to artistic and cultural forms of learning and building community. We see the arts (and particularly the use of hip hop culture and other urban art forms) as a means of engaging youth and creating, interpreting and learning our own histories. Currently much of this work happens without funding and we feel that Canadian Heritage can continue their support of youth-led initiatives by dedicating portions of funds directly to grassroots youth-led arts initiatives.

***2. A review of existing arts grants and contributions programs to assess accessibility for youth-led organizations***

The majority of arts funding delivered through Canadian Heritage is geared towards professional arts organizations. Restrictive eligibility requirements, as well as a lack of funding for community arts programs, acts as a barrier to many youth organizations providing artistic programming to marginalized youth – despite the fact that research funded by Canadian Heritage shows the effectiveness of this type of programming (National Arts & Youth Demonstration Project, McGill University, 2005).

***3. A fund specifically set up to support programs that would offer youth culturally/socially appropriate programming with regard to history, civic engagement, social entrepreneurialism, etc.***

The Grassroots Youth Collaborative has a number of partnerships and relationships with other youth-led initiatives in the city of Toronto. One of the most exciting recommendations to emerge from the *From the Roots Up!* forum is the desire to create and set up a “collaborative culture and heritage program” that would give young people the opportunity to share collectively their histories, a space to build civic engagement, a space to learn about social entrepreneurialism and how to start youth-led organizations. We feel that Canadian Heritage would be a great partner in providing resources in this type of initiative.

***4. Support of anti-racism/anti-oppression training for employers, enforcement officers.***

We recognize that there are serious issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism and other forms of discrimination and violence perpetuated by employers and enforcement officers in the city of Toronto. We feel Canadian Heritage could play a role in supporting anti-racist/anti-oppression training in workplaces and with enforcement agencies like the Toronto Police. We also believe that these training sessions should be directed towards youth in the community as well so that they have a better understanding of the structural causes of racism and Canada’s ongoing history of racism and colonialism.

***5. A fund that would support the establishment of youth-led recording studios, dance studios and other cultural/arts-based programming.***

One of the most needed resources in terms of providing youth engagement opportunities is physical spaces (buildings, recording studios, community centres, dance studios) for youth-led initiatives to run cultural/arts-based programs. It is essential that the government, through Canadian Heritage, start to provide capital funding for youth-led organizations to access spaces for programming. Reviewing eligibility criteria for the Cultural Spaces Canada program, and prioritizing youth-led initiatives within this program is recommended.

**MINISTRY OF EDUCATION OF ONTARIO**

***1. Revamping of current Ontario High School/Grade School curriculum***

Youth participants in the forum were clear about the need to revamp the Ontario High School and Grade School curriculum. Beyond the fact that the participants considered the curriculum to be “racist” and “Eurocentric” suggestions of broader reforms to the curriculum were suggested as well. We feel it is important for youth to have a more active role in developing and changing the current education curriculums.

***2. Repeal of the Ontario “Safe Schools Act” and provisions put in place to actually make schools safer places.***

The current “Safe Schools Act” is severely flawed and it falls short of being in the best interests of a child’s right to education – both protected under the UN Charter of the Rights of the Child and the Education Act. As one youth put it, “it doesn’t make you safer if you are thrown out of school and have no where to go during the school days.”

There is significant evidence of racial targeting and systemic racism/classism that plague the current “Safe Schools Act” and this legislation lacks any sort of alternative based programming for youth that are suspended from schools, nor a clear and accessible appeals and complaints process for students who have been unfairly targeted by teachers. We call on the Ontario government to maintain their promise to repeal the “Safe Schools Act” and to replace this legislation with an Act that would ensure safe schools by: (1) ensuring that racism, homophobia and transphobia workshops be mandatory for all school staff (including principals, teachers, guidance counsellors and support staff); (2) taking a stance of non-cooperation with federal immigration authorities who seek to pull youth out of schools and working with the TDSB, TCDSB, OSSTF, OECTA and CUPE 4400 to implement a policy of “Access Without Fear” for youth without full immigration status who exercise their right to access education; (3) ensuring that curriculum changes are in line with an understanding of Indigenous sovereignty and history.

### ***3. Funding for alternative streams of education, including “Afro-centric” schools.***

As a measure to build on community-based initiatives to address issues of violence, we feel it important that crime prevention initiatives seek to address some of the root causes of violence in our communities. Specifically, the participants in the forum noted that the government should consider alternative streams of education that would look at education from a completely different way of thinking – similar to the ideas of Afrocentric” schools suggested last year.

## **CHILDREN & YOUTH SERVICES ONTARIO**

### ***1. An immediate halting of funding/construction of the “Toronto Youth Centre” set to open in Brampton, Ontario in 2007 – with a focus on small, open-custody and diversion programs as suggested in the Meffe Report.***

One of the most consistent and important demands that came out of the *From the Roots Up!* forum was for youth in the city to call for the immediate halting of funding and construction of the “Toronto Youth Centre”. The \$81 Million it will cost to build the facility and the even greater amount to operate the facility directly contradicts our demands for greater funding of effective youth engagement strategies, job opportunities and education opportunities. It is also in contradiction of the government’s own Meffe inquest which recommended a focus on small, open-custody facilities and diversion programs. We are certain that this superjail will NOT make our communities any safer and feel that the discourse about this facility being like a “summer camp” is both insulting and disturbing. The GYC feels that if the government of Ontario is serious about building safe and healthy communities that they will act on our demands to immediately end the building of this superjail.

Amber Kellen of the John Howard Society of Toronto contends that “by building bigger jails in rural areas, and providing few if any program,, we are creating a situation where more vulnerable people will be warehoused. The only difference is that now, inmates will be over incarcerated in places that are farther from friends, family and other supports, only to be released with little or no discharge planning, out onto the streets with no money and no affordable housing”.

New jails will mean a lack of rehabilitative programming, education, and appropriate disease prevention, creating barriers for housing and employment. People placed in the custody of new jails will face disruption and possible disintegration of family and social connections. Hence, they will return to the community with greater needs, in dire situations involving poverty and homelessness, and is likely to increase the strain on our already overflowing shelter systems.

The more money the government spends on building and maintaining jails, the less funds there will be spent on looking into alternatives that decrease recidivism and homelessness, and thus reduce the likelihood of re-offending.

***2. A free and universal day-care program for youth with children who are seeking to complete high school, college or university.***

It is critical that the Ontario government and Ministry of Children & Youth Services take an active role in setting up a daycare program that would provide youth (ages 14-29) who have children a universal day-care program that would help them to complete high school, college or university. To build healthy and safe communities we need to support young parents in their pursuit of education, job opportunities and other forms of training.

***3. An end to the restriction of being able to access OW if you are receiving OSAP***

Barriers to accessing post secondary education are often insurmountable for youth from racialized and marginalized communities and they continue to rise. We see the need for education to be far more accessible to youth. It is critical that we

invest more in lowering tuition rates, providing more granting opportunities to low-income students and address the excessive bureaucracy that plagues the Ontario Student Assistance Program. In particular, we are calling on the government of Ontario to end the restriction of being to access OW if you are receiving OSAP. A full loan under OSAP no longer covers full tuition costs at some schools and students (especially young parents) are unable to maintain a post secondary education without some form of financial support beyond student loans.

***4. Policy directives which would see at least 25% of the \$15Million “Pinball” fund earmarked for youth-led programming***

While it is encouraging that the provincial government has committed to investing \$15Million in youth service provision. We see it as necessary that at least 25% of this fund be earmarked for youth-led programming that is small grassroots and community-based. The GYC believes that this is the most effective type of programming to address issues affecting some of the most marginalized youth in the province.

**CITY OF TORONTO**

***1. An increase in the use of facilities/space for youth-led programming.***

The City of Toronto should create a list of facilities and spaces that could be opened up and committed to youth-led programming (especially in underserved areas like Rathburn/Etobicoke Centre, Eglinton West and other parts of the inner suburbs). One of the greatest obstacles in preventing youth-led organizations from expanding or for new youth-led initiatives to develop is the lack of physical space to organize programs.

***2. A fund that would provide for core and multiyear programming for youth-led initiatives.***

It is essential for the City of Toronto to drastically increase their support for and funding of youth-led grassroots initiatives. In an effort to build safe and healthy communities, the municipal government is in an ideal political position to support creative youth-led initiatives. Taking examples from programs that have taken place in cities such as Quebec City, the municipal government could play a more fundamental role in supporting grassroots youth-led initiatives for social and urban renewal.

***3. An immediate independent inquest into the shooting death of Jeffrey Reodica and the suspension of officers Dan Belanger & Allan Love.***

As the coroner's inquest to the shooting of Jeffrey Michael Reodica begins on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2006 we urge the City of Toronto to take immediate action to suspend officers Dan Belanger and Allan Love until after the inquest is complete. We also feel it is critical for the City of Toronto to begin an independent inquest into police violence against youth (and especially youth of colour) and to use the recommendations coming out of this inquest to address some of the serious issues of racism, racial profiling and police brutality by the Toronto Police Services.

***4. A fund directly related to supporting the building of community centres that would be controlled, kept up and staffed by community members themselves and not the city government.***

We feel that it is important to return community centres back to communities and

providing funding to building these centres in neighbourhoods where they are lacking. With the scarcity of public spaces in Toronto's inner suburbs and the lack of community spaces to run programs, we feel youth are denied the opportunities that could be provided to run and engage in programming. We feel any "crime prevention" initiative would have a fund committed to supporting the building of community centres and allowing community-based grassroots initiatives to open their own community spaces to run programming and share spaces with members of their neighbourhoods.

***5. A significant shift in funding from Toronto Police Services to Social Programs (especially youth-led initiatives)***

It must be emphasized that the disparities between funding of the Toronto Police Services and other enforcement initiatives over the funding of community-based youth-led programs is part of a fundamental problem that causes more social erosion and fear than it does to build community safety.

Currently the Toronto Police Services receive almost 25% of the municipal budget and we feel the solution to issues of violence in our communities is not more police officers on the street, but rather less police officers. Instead we feel this money should be invested in youth-based initiatives that seek to address root causes of violence and to work on an individual and collective basis with racialized, marginalized and criminalized youth in an effort to build stronger community ties, education and employment opportunities and skills that will allow youth to self-determine their future.