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Diamonds in the Rough: Bridging Gaps in Supports for At-Risk Immigrant and Refugee Youth

Marian J. Rossiter · Katherine R. Rossiter

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Abstract Immigrant youth come to Canada with enormous potential to make a significant, positive contribution to the future of their adopted country. In many cases, this potential is realised; in others, it is not. The ease with which immigrant youth and their families integrate into Canadian society has a strong impact on their futures; those who become marginalised during this process risk becoming alienated or involved with the criminal justice system. Interviews were conducted with 12 stakeholders (including representatives from social service agencies, community groups and the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems) who frequently come into contact with immigrant and refugee youth involved in criminal and/or gang activity. Based on the family, individual, peer, school and community risk and protective factors reported to have an influence on immigrant and refugee youth, recommendations are made for bridging gaps in programming and policy initiatives to support at-risk youth.

Résumé Les jeunes immigrants arrivent au Canada avec énormément de potentiel pour contribuer de façon significative et positive à l'avenir de leur pays adopté. Dans plusieurs cas, ce potentiel se réalise; dans d'autres, il ne se réalise pas. La facilité avec laquelle les jeunes immigrants et leurs familles s'intègrent à la société canadienne a un grand impact sur leur avenir; ceux qui sont mis de côté pendant ce

M. J. Rossiter (✉)
Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta, 6-119B Education North, Edmonton, AB, Canada T6G 2G5
e-mail: MARIAN.ROSSITER@UALBERTA.CA

K. R. Rossiter
School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC, Canada V5A 1S6

processus risquent de devenir marginalisés ou se retrouver face au système de justice pénale. Nous avons passé des entrevues avec 12 intervenants (y compris des représentants d'agences de services sociaux, de groupes communautaires, et des systèmes de justice pénale et de santé mentale dans le contexte judiciaire) qui entrent souvent en contact avec des jeunes immigrants ou réfugiés qui sont impliqués dans des activités criminelles ou de gangs. En nous basant sur des facteurs de risque et de protection connus comme ayant une influence sur les jeunes immigrants et réfugiés, nous proposons des recommandations pour combler les lacunes dans la programmation et les politiques visant l'appui des jeunes à risque.

Keywords Immigrant youth · Refugee youth · At-risk youth · Risk and protective factors · Crime · Gangs

Mots clés jeunes immigrants · jeunes réfugiés · jeunes à risque · facteurs de risque et de protection · crime · gangs

Introduction

Canada is a destination for immigrant families from all over the world. Immigrant youth come to Canada with enormous potential to make a significant, positive contribution to the future of their adopted country. In many cases, this potential is realised; in others, it is sadly not. Young newcomers face social, cultural and academic adjustments that are often exacerbated by racism, conflicting cultural values, educational gaps, language difficulties, culture shock, physical health problems, poverty, isolation and/or symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to war, violence or loss of family members (Ngo and Schleifer 2005). This article reports on the risk and protective factors that are perceived by key stakeholders to influence 'at-risk' immigrant youth who eventually become involved in crime, gangs and violence in Edmonton, Canada.

Immigrants and Crime

Research focusing on the intersections of race, ethnicity, immigration and crime is politically sensitive, highly controversial and marginalised in academia (Barnes 2002). Studies exploring the relationships among these concepts suggest that racial and ethnic minorities, especially visible minorities and those with English or French language difficulties, are disproportionately represented in the Canadian criminal justice system (Heller 1995; Jiwani 2002; Roberts 2002). Furthermore, the public perceives visible minorities and immigrants to be involved in much of the crime committed in Canada, in part due to media representations of racial minorities and crime (Roberts 2002).

Comparative criminological research has shown that the proportion of immigrants in European prison populations (e.g. the Netherlands, Italy, France) is much greater than in Canada and the USA: approximately 25–50% in some European countries, compared with only 5–10% in North America (Newman et al. 2002; Wacquant 1999). Unlike the USA, Canada does not release to the public crime statistics related to race and ethnicity, apart from those of Aboriginal Canadians and federal prison

populations; consequently, there has been little research conducted in this area within the Canadian context. Proponents of the publication of ethnic crime data maintain that Canadians have a right to this information and that it may assist police in the allocation of resources and investigation of crimes (Gabor 1994). Others suggest that these data could be used for research purposes to determine racial and ethnic discrimination in the criminal justice system and to facilitate the development or expansion of the supports necessary to address community problems that might otherwise remain ignored or undetected (Gabor 1994; Hatt 1994; Tonry 1997). Those who oppose the dissemination of such information argue that it could be misinterpreted and lead to negative stereotyping and racial profiling, without providing information that might contribute to the development of policy responses (Hatt 1994; Roberts 2002). Despite calls from politicians and police for the systematic collection of data linking race, ethnicity and crime, scholars maintain that the collection of such data is so fraught with conceptual and methodological difficulties that the data are ultimately of little value, particularly in a country as racially and ethnically diverse as Canada (Hatt 1994; Johnston 1994; Roberts 1994, 2002). Although crime statistics are not readily available, data from the 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs suggest that

> a majority of gang members (some 82%) are from the so-called visible minorities—African–Canadian, Asian, Hispanic, East Indian and the like. We can assume that many of these youth are first- or second-generation Canadians, the offspring of parents who immigrated to Canada over the past couple of decades. (Chettleburgh 2007: 29–30)

The cost of crime to society is significant, and some scholars argue that investment in at-risk youth is more cost-effective than other responses, such as punishment or increased funding for police and the justice system (Cohen 1998). Data compiled by the Rand Corporation in the USA reveal that the cost of incarceration is seven times greater than the promotion of school completion and five times greater than parent training (Waller 2006). In Canada, the cost to incarcerate a youth for 1 year is approximately $100,000 (Clapham 2008). Despite the current trend toward 'get tough' crime control policies in Canada, Waller argues that key stakeholders (e.g. education, housing, social services, recreation, business, police, justice, neighbourhoods) should focus on addressing the root causes of crime in their communities.

Theoretical Background

The hierarchy of needs of Abraham Maslow (1970) provides an intuitively appealing framework for examining the settlement adjustments facing immigrant families (Adler 1977; Nguyen 1987). According to Maslow's theory, before individuals can realise their dreams and capabilities, they must first satisfy four sets of needs. The first two sets relate to survival: *physiological* needs—the basic necessities, such as food, water and sleep; and *safety* needs—safe shelter, stability and protection from danger. When immigrants and refugees first arrive in Canada, much of their energy is spent satisfying these survival needs. Social needs must also be met: *belonging* needs—for friends and family to provide love and the sense of affiliation with a group or community; and *esteem* needs—based on respect and appreciation from self

and others for individuals' competence and accomplishments. In addition to satisfying these needs, which are common to all, immigrant and refugee youth must develop linguistic and cultural competence.

A wide range of these basic and social needs are reflected in studies of immigrant and refugee youth in other Canadian cities. A review of the literature points to multiple variables that affect their adaptation and integration, for example, family support and stability, socio-economic status, physical and mental health, age of arrival, language proficiency, interpersonal skills, social networks, personal resilience, employment opportunities and housing and neighbourhood, among others (e.g. Anisef and Kilbride 2003; Carter et al. 2008; Enns 2008; Kilbride and Anisef 2001; MacKay and Tavares 2005; Murdie 2008; Ngo and Schleifer 2005; Taylor 2005; Totten 2008).

One of the most critical factors in a successful transition to Canadian society is education (Anisef and Kilbride 2003). Upon arrival in Alberta, an increasing number of refugee youth enter school with gaps in their formal education, and the majority of teachers in the province have little or no training in how to adapt curriculum content to accommodate these learners (Alberta Education 2006). Young newcomers who arrive without English may take only 2 to 3 years to acquire basic interpersonal communication skills; however, the cognitive academic language proficiency that is necessary for successful content-based learning takes from 5 to 7 years to develop (Cummins 2000). ESL children who are older upon arrival face greater linguistic and academic challenges; refugee youth with interrupted schooling and lack of formal education and/or literacy skills in their first language are further disadvantaged. Studies of school dropout rates of immigrant youth have indicated that 46–74% of immigrant youth whose native language is not English fail to complete high school (Derwing et al. 1999; Watt and Roessingh 1994, 2001). The options available to these youth are few, as they have limited linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence and employment skills. The academic challenges that immigrant children face are often exacerbated by individual, family, peer and community factors that may leave newcomer youth vulnerable to victimisation or recruitment to engage in illegal activities. The subsequent loss of social capital to Canadian society is significant and many of these marginalised youth risk becoming involved in crime, violence and gang activity (Gordon 2000; Wortley 2003; Wortley and Tanner 2007).

Wortley (2003) proposed that researchers who study the intersections of race, ethnicity, immigration and crime consider four theoretical frameworks to explain these complex relationships: the importation model, cultural conflict model, strain/frustration model and bias model. The *importation model* suggests that a proportion of foreigners immigrate to Canada specifically to commit crimes. These individuals may have had criminal lifestyles before coming to Canada, and they come here with the intention of perpetrating further crime, particularly through affiliation with gangs and groups involved in organised crime (e.g. the Mafia). The *cultural conflict model* posits that newcomers engage in various cultural or religious customs and practices that contravene the Criminal Code of Canada; in some instances, traditional perspectives may even justify criminal behaviours (Yeager 1997). For example, newcomers from countries where substance use or domestic violence is not punished may inadvertently break Canadian laws by continuing these practices. The *strain/*

frustration model suggests that immigrants' settlement experiences in Canadian society lead them to become involved in criminal activity. Because of factors such as underemployment, racism and poverty, some individuals may become involved in activities such as drug trafficking to improve their economic circumstances. Finally, the *bias model* is a critical perspective which holds that certain racial-ethnic groups come into disproportionate contact with the justice system because of systemic discrimination and bias on the part of criminal justice and legal representatives. Those who ascribe to this theory maintain that some visible minorities are subject to over-policing, racial profiling, more false arrests and harsher sentencing than other groups. For example, systemic discrimination in the Canadian criminal justice system has been cited as a contributing factor in the over-representation of Aboriginal peoples in pre-trial detention and correctional facilities, as well as racial disparities in sentencing and parole decisions (Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008; Hylton 2002; Williams 2001). Each of these models offers a unique explanation for the relationship between race, ethnicity, immigration and crime and calls for a different set of policy responses (Wortley 2003).

The present study addresses the circumstances of disenfranchised immigrant youth who have come into conflict with the law in Edmonton. It focuses on factors perceived by key stakeholders to exert an influence on at-risk immigrant youth (between the ages of 12 and 25) and on those who eventually become involved in crime, gangs and/or violence. The research questions in this study were as follows:

1. What crimes are committed by immigrant youth who come into conflict with the justice system?
2. Which factors exert a negative influence on at-risk immigrant youth and on those who eventually become involved in crime, gangs and/or violence?
3. Which factors exert a positive influence on young immigrant newcomers?

Method

Participants

Interviews were conducted by the first author with 12 stakeholders who had come into contact with immigrant youth who are involved or at risk of becoming involved with the criminal justice system. Participants worked directly with immigrant youth, both in the community and in the justice system and included three representatives from social service agencies, four from community-based groups and five from within the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems. They had an average of 9.6 years' experience (Range=3–16 years, Mean=10.5 years) working with youth in their current positions; six of the interviewees were themselves immigrants to Canada.

Instrument

A qualitative, semi-structured interview guide was developed by the researchers. Questions focused on the participants' roles and involvement with immigrant youth;

the type of criminal activities committed by the youth with whom they had come into contact; the risk and protective factors that were perceived to influence immigrant youth and those who eventually become involved in crime, gangs and violence and the interviewees' opinion of the theoretical model(s) (described above) that best represented the relationship between immigrant youth and crime.

Procedures

Potential participants were identified using chain referral sampling, and representatives were drawn from both within and outside the criminal justice system, to ensure a more balanced perspective. Initial informants were identified by community partners and through the first author's involvement in community initiatives addressing youth and criminal justice issues in Edmonton. Potential interviewees were contacted by email, provided with a description of the study and invited to participate. Interviews were conducted in the office of the stakeholder or of the researcher, were audio-taped with the permission of the interviewees and lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 h. The digital recordings were then transcribed using ExpressScribe and analysed using qualitative content analysis procedures, which involved the organisation and categorisation of interview data and the identification of common themes. The authors engaged in investigator triangulation, by analysing the data independently before working together to identify themes and draw conclusions, in order to enhance the validity of the study and confirm the research findings.

Results

Criminal Activities

Several patterns emerged in relation to the type, frequency and severity of criminal activities committed by immigrant youth, as well as their gender and the age at which they were involved in crime. Participants reported that youth were recruited into gangs and involved in illegal activity at ages as low as 10 years, but the majority of criminal activity was estimated to begin around the ages of 13 to 15 and to drop off at about 18 to 20 years when youth transition into adulthood. The most common criminal activities reported (from most to least common) were drug dealing, property crimes, assault, sexual assault and homicide. Boys were perceived to be more involved in crime—and in more serious crime—than girls at all ages. The participants indicated that all immigrant and refugee groups have some youth who commit crimes but that the majority of immigrant and refugee youth are not involved in illegal activity; in other words, immigrant and refugee youth were not considered to be in conflict with the law to a greater extent than their Canadian peers. However, refugee youth were perceived to be particularly vulnerable to recruitment by gangs.

Risk Factors

The factors that were found to exert a negative influence on immigrant youth were categorised as family, individual, peer, school and community risk factors.

Family Risk Factors

The participants emphasised that adaptation to a new life in Canada can be very stressful. Parents may be so consumed with their own efforts to cope that they do not have the capacity to deal with their children's problems. They may suffer from mental health issues (e.g. PTSD, depression), addiction (e.g. alcohol, drugs, gambling), domestic violence and/or a sense of powerlessness, hopelessness and alienation. Disillusionment is not uncommon:

> *The family… thinks that everything is going to be golden when they get here. They find out quickly that it's not golden, it's rusted…. They are coming into a society that is totally full of money. They want everything. They expect that they should have everything somehow by magic.* (Community-based representative)

Family poverty is also an issue for many newcomers. Some parents may be unemployed; others often hold multiple entry-level jobs in order to provide for their families. Many parents lack marketable skills, recognised foreign credentials and/or competence in English, and they live in poverty because of underemployment. As a result, youth may struggle to have their basic needs met, leaving them with poor perceptions of both themselves and their parents. Government- and privately sponsored refugees face further financial burdens as they struggle to repay the transportation loans made to them when they came to Canada (Canadian Council for Refugees 2008).

When parents are unable to provide adequately for their children, youth may be expected to supplement the family income. This is difficult for newcomer youth, particularly refugees, who may already be struggling to succeed in school, both academically and socially:

> *Some kids, especially the youth, have been supporting their single moms with their other siblings. Back in the refugee camps, they could be carrying stuff and helping and getting a little bit of money and then support mom. But, here, they are finding it hard… to go to school and to go to work to make the money.* (Social services representative)

Some, faced with this difficult challenge, may be tempted to become involved in more lucrative, illegal activity:

> *…if there is an expectation or a value within your culture that you're supposed to contribute to the family and the well-being of the family and you see your parents struggling to work, you don't have the right clothes, you're just barely getting by, then when somebody approaches you and offers you $200 to run this little bag of dope across town, that can be a big incentive... especially when other doors are closed for you.* (Community-based representative)

In some cases, when the parents of immigrant youth are struggling financially, they may even passively support their children's involvement in criminal activity that will help the whole family to get through the next month. One youth worker explained:

> *…[E]ight out of every 10 kids… that we get out of a gang went in for survival. And it was basic. They didn't have appropriate accommodation. They didn't have food, they didn't have clothes. Their parents couldn't pay the bills. And*

their parents said 'Okay, just do it part-time.' Sometimes parents okay it because they know they can't [pay their bills] at the end of the month from work. (Community-based representative)

But this part-time involvement in criminal activity can lead to a career of crime, as illegitimate sources of income become the youth's primary or only source of income:

So [the youth] drops out of school and he goes and deals drugs because it's easier work. And makes good money… and then he lies to his parents that he's still working that kitchen job - that's where he's getting the money from - so his parents take his money and pay the bills without questioning. And he's able to help his smaller brothers and sisters. (Community-based representative)

Other forms of family support for youth may be significantly reduced after arrival in Canada. In some cases, youth may not have any immediate family here at all; they might have an aunt or uncle or pre-existing friends, but these individuals may be unable to provide the guidance that they need. Even those children who do live with their parents may spend very little time with them because their parents are working and/or studying, "so, the kids are raising themselves with the help of the TV" (Social services representative). Lack of after-school supervision increases the risk that youth will become involved in crime, gangs and/or violence:

…we see these drug recruiters or gang recruiters feasting [from] three o'clock to five o'clock… between when the kids exit school and [when] mom and dad get home for supper…. [The recruiters] come with their flashy cars, taking them out for supper, showing their wads of cash, and, to a young guy, it looks very attractive. (Criminal justice representative)

The involvement of one relative in criminal or gang activity can easily increase the vulnerability of other members of the family:

When one from the family gets into that sort of crime, the family is more at risk because then the other younger brothers and sisters are likely to follow if the parents don't work hard on them…. We've seen families of five or six losing all of these kids into the street. (Community-based representative)

As youth acculturate and learn English more quickly, the intergenerational gap widens: "they're often sort of torn in terms of their identity, in terms of where they belong" (Criminal justice representative). When youth are caught between cultures with conflicting value systems, the older generation may not know how best to respond. Parents may be afraid of disciplining their children for fear of intervention by social services—"Back home, it's the whole village that looks after a child; here, the neighbour calls the police" (Community-based representative). In other families, parents or older children may use corporal punishment as a form of discipline. Family breakdown is not uncommon, as shifting roles and other stresses result in growing tension and/or violence.

So you've got a traditional Muslim family…and lo and behold, their daughter—off goes the hijab, on comes the Mac make-up, in comes the conflict—all of a sudden the family shuns the daughter, and the daughter goes and lives on street corners. (Criminal justice representative)

In contrast to their expectations, "…families are struggling with trying to survive… they absolutely lose the power to parent their kids in the way that they would have parented them elsewhere, including refugee camps" (Social services representative). Furthermore, those who lack language skills and/or an understanding of Canadian educational and judicial systems are unable to advocate for their children when the latter encounter difficulties.

Individual Risk Factors

Pre-migration violence and trauma were reported to be predisposing risk factors for youth involvement in violent and criminal activity in Canada: many youth from refugee camps have witnessed or experienced violence (e.g. rape, murder, torture) and suffer from depression, nightmares, flashbacks and/or disturbed sleep patterns. Former child soldiers have a particularly difficult time recovering from their experiences. The psychological effects of violence and trauma can also affect other aspects of youth's lives: "People who come from war-torn zones and have post-traumatic stress or anxiety—all their symptoms basically prevent them from learning and adapting" (Social services representative). Some immigrant youth struggle to deal with addiction, while physical health issues are a problem for those trying to gain acceptance from peers and entry into social groups.

Additional risk factors that were perceived to have a negative effect on immigrant youth include poor decision-making and interpersonal skills, learning disabilities, risky behaviours, the use of violence to solve problems, distrust of authorities, lack of personal and cultural identity and a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. But culturally sensitive counselling services remain woefully inadequate for these youth as well as for those with personality, attachment and other disorders; waiting lists are long, and some treatment is accessible only after youth have come into conflict with the law and been sentenced for serious crimes.

Peer Risk Factors

Interviewees stated that youth who have difficulty developing social networks, especially outside their own ethnic group, frequently face isolation, exclusion, inter-ethnic conflict, discrimination and victimisation: "[T]hey're constantly being picked on for no apparent reason" (Community-based representative). If they spend a lot of time on their own, they can more easily become affiliated with groups of other disenfranchised youth. Association with antisocial peers, however, can lead to violent altercations and crime (e.g. assaults, stabbings, shootings, drug use).

The pressure to conform in order to gain acceptance from peers is great and may also increase vulnerability to involvement in crime. When they compare their economic circumstances with those of more affluent peers, many youth have difficulty distinguishing between wants and needs. Looking a particular way or wearing the 'right' clothing is particularly important for peer acceptance:

> *You've got to have the outfit, you've got to have the shoes, no matter what you do; otherwise, you're going to be sitting way over there, totally isolated and alienated, which is almost impossible for these young people to face…. That*

means that you have to make money... prostitution… part-time work… drug-dealing… other illegal activity… you have to fit in. (Community-based representative)

When conflict arises between peer and cultural practices, peers tend to have a greater influence on youth than parents because youth spend the majority of their time with their peers at school and in the community.

School Risk Factors

Stakeholders in this study cited a number of risk factors in schools, which themselves are under enormous pressure to cope with newcomers; one participant stated: "Education—I think that's where we're failing right from the onset" (Criminal justice representative).

Problems were noted with the integration of students into mainstream classes, particularly of youth with limited or interrupted formal education, who find it hard to adapt to sitting still in school for six hours a day, struggle to keep up with their Canadian peers and suffer from feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem if they fail to do so. Participants in the study criticised low teacher–student ratios and the lack of resources and appropriate programming for ESL youth. They noted that many staff have low expectations of newcomers and little or no knowledge of the educational, cultural and family backgrounds that might help them to understand these students. They may be unaware that many parents are unable to assist their children with homework because of their own limited English language proficiency and lack of familiarity with the education system and that they may be unable to supervise homework or attend parent–teacher meetings because of work, rather than disinterest in their children's progress. Teachers may also not be aware that some youth work night shifts, resulting in lateness, inattention in class or uncompleted assignments and that others may not have access to basic needs (food for lunch, clean clothes, etc.) because of economic hardship. Youth who work part- or full-time in addition to attending school were perceived by stakeholders to make slower academic progress and, thus, to be at higher risk of dropping out.

In addition to academic, cultural and linguistic barriers, participants perceived bullying to be a problem for immigrant and refugee youth in many schools, particularly verbal bullying, name-calling and teasing. One interviewee stated:

There is serious discrimination, bullying that happens for most of these kids and so their families have talked about it, but they felt helpless. They didn't know what to do. The kids felt helpless, too, because they were not able to fight, which is the way they know how [to cope]. (Social services representative)

Survival skills that some youth developed in refugee camps are neither understood nor tolerated in educational or other community settings. However, engaging in physical violence in response to bullying in schools with zero tolerance policies may result in numerous suspensions and expulsions for immigrants and refugees. Participants stated that these processes and protocols are not well

understood by either youth or their parents. They further exclude youth from the school system, leaving them isolated, with no viable alternatives; interviewees stated that teachers in alternative schools are ill prepared to work with ESL students. Once outside the school system, with inadequate education and literacy skills, they become part of an underclass with few employment skills and may end up on the streets. Most do not have the financial means to access further education after the age of 20.

Participants noted that existing challenges for at-risk youth have been exacerbated by Alberta's booming economy, which, although currently in a period of adjustment, had previously expanded the market for hard drugs. Furthermore, several participants cited schools as settings for the recruitment of youth into drug-related crimes.

> *One of the moms I work with said, 'I have to come here every day after school because I know some of the drug dealers are right here in the school playground' and she has boys so she said she has to make sure '...they don't get them before I do.'* (Social services representative)

Community Risk Factors

In addition to the family-, individual-, peer- and school-related difficulties experienced by immigrant and refugee youth, interviewees identified a number of community risk factors. For example, within ethno-cultural communities that are not well established in Canada, youth were reported to have access to few role models (especially male and career role models), few leadership roles and limited community support networks:

> *It needs to be their own community of people who start to put the support in place and start to recognise that they need to be proactive, but they are not organised enough. They don't have the resources yet because so many of them are struggling to make their own way, working so many jobs, etc.* (Criminal justice representative)

But intra-cultural differences and disagreements were cited as a barrier to building networks of community supports in some instances. One stakeholder explained:

> *Because we come from different tribes, we come from different regions, we speak different languages, and because of the political situation back home and the war, it's like one tribe is set against the other and the other region is set against the other. So it takes an extra effort for me to say, you know, 'Let me put this behind, but let's work together for the good of our children'. ...[S]o many of them have not reached that stage yet; they are still trying to overcome all [their differences].* (Community-based representative)

Many participants also cited a lack of safe and affordable housing as a major community risk factor for families:

> *[Newcomers] can't... afford to buy a house, let alone... rent a place. So you've got lots of families—sometimes three families—living in an apartment. And*

they have to do it illegally. They get caught and they are booted out, and they have to do it all over again… that's natural in [home country]. You have everybody stay with you and the whole cultural thing, but you never have enough money. (Community-based representative)

Deciding where to live can also be a difficult decision for newcomers:

Many of our families, because of their income, are accessing [city] housing… you are in between trying to live where you can afford versus… the neighbourhood where you want to raise your children. (Social services representative)

With few options within their means, families may feel compelled to choose subsidised housing, which can create risks for their children:

… it puts them in a place where there is a lot of dysfunction in the community… for a youth to grow up in a neighbourhood where there is a lot of violence, a lot of chaos, a lot of drug dealing, a lot of trouble in general, where you have to watch your back—the dilemma is that in order to survive there, you have to do the same thing as everybody else is doing. (Criminal justice representative)

One participant described social housing complexes as "zones of decay for immigrant children" (Community-based representative). Newcomers living in unsafe communities face potentially overwhelming challenges, as one immigrant interviewee stated:

[S]ome…—I'll be honest with you—are better off in refugee camps… there, they actually have a support system in place. They might not have food; they might not eat five times a day, but I know they have a social and emotional support right there under their tent. (Social services representative)

Throughout the city, community leagues offer a variety of programmes, but stakeholders considered many of them inappropriate for or inaccessible to immigrant and refugee youth: "There are a lot of community leagues that have wonderful programmes but [they're] fee-based programmes. You have to volunteer... there are a lot of barriers built in; also, there are no community centres that are multi-culturally friendly" (Social services representative). Other interviewees noted that, despite good programmes, activity leaders were not culturally or racially reflective of the population that they were trying to serve; this resulted in low immigrant/refugee participation. Overall, stakeholders reported a lack of viable opportunities for young people to engage in after-school programmes, sports, culture, the arts and other worthwhile recreational pursuits in their communities.

Protective Factors

Participants identified a number of factors that were thought to exert a positive influence on immigrant youth; these, too, were categorised as family, individual, peer, school and community protective factors.

Family Protective Factors

Youth who received moral support from and spent time with parents and/or extended family were perceived to be less vulnerable than those who did not. Likewise, youth who lived in two-parent families or with parents who, because of their financial security, were able to be at home more regularly, were viewed as advantaged. Family-shared faith was also perceived to be an asset; as one participant explained, "Right after school… [e]verybody has to be at home. They have to pray together. So that… connects the family together, it's a big thing for the family survival. Because they stick together and do one thing together" (Criminal justice representative).

Another protective factor cited by participants was parents with an educational background who are able to understand the school system and are thus in a better position to provide support to their children: "Even if they don't speak the language, they know about homework, they know that kids need to understand the whole system, that's a huge protective factor because… school is such a big part of the kids' lives" (Social services representative).

Individual Protective Factors

A number of individual factors were reported to make youth less vulnerable to crime. Immigrant and refugee youth with a sense of cultural identity and belonging were seen to be less at risk than those without. Gender was reported to be a protective factor; females were less likely to be involved in crime, as were youth who had developed a sense of accomplishment and had respect for education. Some youth were considered less vulnerable to crime than others because of their individual strength and resilience:

> *What we are left with are the ones that have made it through the ten years in the refugee camp, the ones that have made it to immigration, come across the border, [who] are tigers and really have a sense of resiliency.* (Criminal justice representative)

Others were perceived to have succeeded in Canada and to have avoided temptations to become involved in crime because of their superior decision-making skills:

> *I think we underestimate the power of choice; a lot of kids—even when they are being pounded on and have terrible nightmares, and have this disorder and that disorder and no stability in their lives—they are still able to make smart choices.* (Criminal justice representative)

Peer Protective Factors

Several stakeholders stated that pro-social inter-cultural peer programmes and relationships were protective factors: "It's the same positive peer relationships that all kids need—not just immigrant and refugee kids" (Community-based representative).

One interviewee noted that having pro-social peers can provide healthy alternatives for youth with less desirable associates:

> *...even if they're involved in a very negative peer group, if they've had experience with a more positive peer group and they...still have friends in that peer group, they could easily move over, and they won't be totally stranded without friends if they were to shift...* (Criminal justice representative)

School Protective Factors

Education was seen as extremely important for immigrant and refugee youth: "Not having [education] is what's creating the push in the other direction, and having it is what would save them" (Criminal justice representative). Specific school-based programmes that were cited as especially helpful included English as a second language, life skills training, career planning, job search skills, resumé writing, computer training and employment mentoring.

> *[Employment programmes are] going to persuade a lot of immigrant students to do the right thing instead of walking out of grade 11 or 12 and then getting into drugs or prostitution. They'll know that there are certain ways of getting money out there, decent ways, and also that there are agencies out there that can help them.* (Community-based representative)

The development of positive relationships with caring adults in the school setting, such as ESL or mainstream teachers, counsellors and School Resource Officers, was also considered to be a protective factor. In some schools, members of ethno-cultural communities offer approved courses designed to help students develop identity and intercultural competence. Here, immigrant youth can begin to make decisions about various aspects of their home and adopted cultures:

> *...what's good about their own culture, what's not so good, what you like about the Canadian culture, and what's not so good about the Canadian culture that you don't want to adapt to; and then how to combine the best of both cultures. That helps them to get that self-identity piece.* (Social services representative)

Many schools provide opportunities for newcomer youth to contribute positively to their communities by becoming involved in social justice or other activities that develop their leadership skills and perceptions of self-efficacy. After-school homework clubs provide one-on-one help that is extremely important for many students; newcomer youth who become involved in music, dance, sport and other such programmes also benefit from the development of broader social support networks.

Community Protective Factors

Protective factors can also be provided through the activities of faith communities, cultural organisations and other groups within the community (e.g. Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Clubs). Where parents are often absent, clusters of families

can provide a sense of extended family and safe supervision for the children in their communities:

> *There is this collective service… if you know that one of the parents is going to be home today but that two are at work, then one can come around, supervise those in the family as long as they're in the same neighbourhood, or take them… swimming, or… to play some sports.… If such support is increased…, I believe it will reduce the number of youth falling into crime, just as a result of peer pressure or influence from others.* (Community-based representative)

In some communities, mentors are available to maintain frequent contact with individual youth and help with homework or provide information on such topics as health, nutrition, managing on a reduced income, or communication with teachers or classmates. Mentors show youth "how to get through a day or through a week or through a month without having to panic" (Community-based representative). As one youth worker explained,

> *Some people say we babysit. We don't see it as babysitting. We see it as truly walking with them. We're not walking in front of them and they're not walking behind us. We're walking side by side…. To some people, this is a job… To us, it's life….. What they really need is a person—not a programme—that has an understanding of that child or youth…. We're doing it on a basketball court—we're not doing it in a boardroom.* (Community-based representative)

And in doing so, dedicated workers such as these are helping youth exit gangs, offering them opportunities for success and keeping others from becoming involved with drugs and crime.

Perspectives on Race, Ethnicity, Immigration and Crime

The participants in this study were informed that, at present, Canada does not release crime statistics that identify the ethnic or racial origin or place of birth of the accused, with the exception of Aboriginal Canadians. They were asked if they believed that having more and better available information on immigration, ethnicity and criminal behaviour would be beneficial. There was little consensus among respondents; five participants strongly supported the release of these data to the public, five participants strongly opposed their release and the two remaining participants described it as a ‘double-edged sword’. Those opposing the release of these data raised concerns about the potential for abuse, with this information being used to stigmatise immigrants and justify racial profiling. Those who supported the release of this information argued, on the other hand, that statistics of this nature help to draw attention to the issues faced by some immigrant groups and, in turn, identify solutions to the problems they face. Respondents had a keen sense of the dangers of releasing these data as well as the benefits, such as the potential to improve perceptions of immigrants in Canada, acknowledge the challenges they face during the settlement process and celebrate the positive contributions immigrants make to Canadian society.

Participants were then presented with a brief description of the four models that have been proposed to explain the relationship between race, ethnicity and crime

(Wortley, 2003) and asked which they thought best represented the relationship between immigrant youth and crime. The majority of participants indicated that the Strain/Frustration Model best explained the relationship between immigrant and refugee youth and crime, because it reflected youth's experiences of poverty, discrimination, inadequate housing, poor education and the inability to satisfy their needs and desires, relative to their expectations of life in Canada. Several interviewees stated that the Importation and Cultural Conflict models better explained the criminal behaviour of immigrant and refugee adults than of youth. Crime committed by some refugee youth was thought to be the result of a criminalised lifestyle or survival strategies learned in the context of war and/or refugee camps, where "you get your chicken by murdering your neighbour, and that's an acceptable norm" (Criminal Justice Representative). The Bias in the Justice System model was perceived to describe the experience of Aboriginal populations better than that of immigrant and refugee groups, with only one participant suggesting that there may be a slight over-representation of immigrants in the Canadian criminal justice system.

Finally, participants were asked to identify the factor that they perceived to have the greatest impact on immigrant youth who become involved in crime. More participants pointed to educational difficulties than to any other factor. Other important factors identified by the participants were peer influence, socio-economic factors, such as poverty, mental health and substance abuse problems, and limited parental or family support.

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative, exploratory study corroborate those from research conducted in other Canadian cities (e.g. Anisef and Kilbride 2003; MacKay and Tavares 2005; Ngo and Schleifer 2005; Taylor 2005; Totten 2008). The family, individual, peer, school and community risk factors that were perceived to exert a negative influence on immigrant and refugee youth often compound others, leaving some youth with seemingly insurmountable challenges as they strive to adapt to Canadian society. According to key stakeholders, immigrant parents struggle to provide for and supervise their children, while pursuing educational and employment opportunities of their own, which may leave disadvantaged and unsupervised youth vulnerable to involvement in criminal activities and/or recruitment into gangs. The vulnerability of individual youth may be further exacerbated by pre-existing mental health issues and psychological damage resulting from discrimination, victimisation and bullying by peers at school. Unfortunately, teachers are often unaware of the challenges faced by immigrant and refugee students, and the education system itself is ill prepared to meet their complex needs. Isolation and a lack of social support at school and in the wider community mean that immigrant and refugee youth may be left with few options, and antisocial peers involved in drugs, crime and gangs may be perceived as attractive alternatives.

Although youth face a multitude of challenges upon arrival to Canada, stakeholders identified a number of factors that can protect these youth from becoming involved in crime and violence. Family and community supports, including mentors and role models, can have an enormous affirming influence on

immigrant and refugee youth. Programmes at school and in the community offer opportunities for the development of relationships with both trusted adults and pro-social peers; these may be invaluable to youth who are struggling to develop a sense of identity and belonging. Finally, and importantly, participants emphasised the role of individual resilience and the capacity of immigrant and refugee youth to succeed in the face of adversity.

The risk and protective factors above also relate to Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs. It is clear from the findings of this research that if immigrant and refugee youth's physiological, safety, belonging and self-esteem needs are not met, they may seek to meet these needs through alternative means and, in so doing, may be more susceptible to involvement in crime. Families living in poverty are often unable to meet the physiological and safety needs of their children; at-risk youth who go to school without breakfast or lunch and live in subsidised housing may be especially vulnerable. Youth who lack close relationships to family, school and community or who suffer from feelings of inadequacy or failure are easy targets for gangs who promise to fulfil their needs for belonging and self-esteem.

Policy Recommendations

Four major recommendations for meeting the multi-dimensional needs of at-risk immigrant and refugee youth are proposed based on the findings of the study. First, in order to enhance the integration of immigrant and refugee youth and their families into our communities, sustained adequate funding must be provided for settlement, mental health and multicultural services (e.g. health brokers, cultural brokers in schools) that facilitate the successful adaptation of newcomers to host communities. Funding to these services has not risen in proportion with the government's increased acceptance of high-needs applicants from refugee camps, although these families often have needs that exceed what conventional settlement programmes can provide.

Second, all levels of government must take initiatives to ensure that the socioeconomic circumstances of immigrant families meet their basic needs. Safe, affordable and appropriate housing is essential for stability; without this, newcomers' health and well-being are at risk. Recognition of foreign credentials would also alleviate poverty and improve labour market integration by allowing immigrants to continue working in their chosen occupations. The government should also absorb resettlement loans to government- and privately sponsored refugees and dependants; repayment of the principal and interest on overseas medical examinations, processing charges and transportation to Canada places both financial and psychological stresses on refugee families. The current practice of sponsoring refugees with the highest needs has made this particularly onerous and brings further hardship to this vulnerable population.

Third, communities must also establish a comprehensive, integrated network of systems to support immigrant and refugee youth and their families; these could be centralised in a local reception centre, with ongoing follow-up and support in school and community settings. Information and advocacy should be provided regarding education, settlement resources, housing, employment, social services, counselling,

faith groups, ethno-cultural communities, health services, summer and after-school programmes, recreational activities, service clubs, youth agencies, mentoring programmes, police, justice, corporations and other relevant services. Data on evidence-based protective programmes and practices should be compiled and made available to schools and other stakeholders; effective resources and programme models from other jurisdictions (e.g. MENTOR; Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services) can then be evaluated and, if appropriate, adapted for use in local contexts to ensure the optimal use of limited resources. Furthermore, it is crucial that awareness, accessibility and affordability of further supports available in the community be improved. It is incumbent on all community partners to evaluate the services that they provide and to ensure that they are culturally sensitive and accessible to both immigrant and refugee youth and their families. Coordination of holistic, inter-agency services for immigrant families will enhance the educational attainment of youth, facilitate their access to meaningful employment and promote healthy lifestyles.

Finally, because schools have extended contact with youth, the most critical needs of this population should be met there. Initial language, orientation and cultural support in reception centres is recommended, along with early identification of at-risk youth, using culturally appropriate diagnostic and assessment tools. Effective, evidence-based interventions should follow, along with flexible programmes of studies. English is essential for both academic achievement and access to job markets; ESL teachers should be trained specialists, and schools should make a greater effort to value and address the needs of English language learners.

All school staff should receive training in intercultural competence and understand the second language acquisition process, as well as immigrant and refugee youth, their backgrounds, the diversity within their ethnic communities and the adjustment difficulties experienced by their families. Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS), a programme supported by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, can facilitate these endeavours, as well as ongoing communication between schools and their immigrant students and families. Teachers should receive pre-service and/or in-service education to deliver effective differentiated instruction, and competent K-12 teachers, as well as other staff, should be recruited from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds to provide role models in the schools. Youth need opportunities to develop positive relationships and to participate in school life; peer ambassador programmes that carefully match newcomers with more established immigrants from the same culture can also be very helpful. Responses to discrimination and bullying within the larger school community should be immediate and restorative, in contrast to existing zero-tolerance policies, which emphasise exclusion and punishment (Morrison 2007; Stinchcomb et al. 2006). Goal-setting guidance, career counselling and improved accessibility to funding for further education should be available to all immigrant and refugee youth. In addition, schools should work closely with ethno-cultural communities on a continuous basis. School-based after-school or weekend outreach programmes for family members of all ages should be provided (e.g. intercultural communication skills, cross-cultural parenting, orientation to systems in Canadian society), based on expressed needs and interests.

In sum, it does take a village to raise a child, and in order to establish safe, healthy communities, we need the coordinated efforts of multiple levels of government and diverse sectors of the community. As one stakeholder cautioned,

> *If you're going to have…immigrant youth come here, you either change our system somewhat to accommodate them, or you're going to face failures. And the cost to society for this is going to be astronomical—it's going to be huge.* (Community-based representative)

If families, schools and the larger community work together effectively to assist newcomer youth in meeting their basic, safety and social needs, immigrant and refugee youth will become less vulnerable to victimisation and involvement in criminal activity, will attain more successful academic and employment outcomes and will ultimately be better able to achieve their potential.

Recommendations for Future Research

There is a paucity of research on immigrant youth and crime in Canada, in part due to the limited availability of statistical data on race, ethnicity, immigration and crime. In this study, we have turned to qualitative methods to explore the perceptions of stakeholders who come into contact with immigrant youth who are involved or at risk of becoming involved with the criminal justice system. This approach was valuable in identifying the risk and protective factors that influence immigrant and refugee youth, as well as the gaps in supports and services that may increase youth's vulnerability to gang recruitment and shape their pathways to crime. Further research is needed to determine the nature and extent of immigrant youth crime in Canada and to identify the characteristics of those youth who eventually become involved in crime and gang-related activities. Research is also required to evaluate the success of programmes designed to support immigrant and refugee youth in the community, to identify promising programmes and practices and to assist policy-makers in bridging gaps in supports and services for immigrant and refugee youth. Studies such as the one above can assist in developing national and international awareness of priorities for the development of policies and services to address the continuing needs of newcomer youth.

This study is part of a larger research project exploring the circumstances of immigrant and refugee youth who eventually become involved in crime, gangs and violence. In the next phase of the study, interviews will be conducted with immigrant and refugee youth and young adults who have come into contact with the criminal justice system, to explore their lived experiences and the factors they perceive to have had an influence on their pathways to crime. This research will allow us to better understand youth's experiences of immigration and settlement, to identify commonalities and differences in the experiences of immigrant and refugee youth and to determine gaps in services that, if bridged, might provide the necessary supports for these youth to realise their full potential.

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Marian J. Rossiter is Associate Professor in the Teaching English as a Second Language Programme in the Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta. Her research interests include second language speaking fluency, vocabulary development and the integration of immigrant and refugee youth into Canadian society.

Katherine R. Rossiter is a Ph.D. Candidate in the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University. Her research interests focus on the victimisation and criminalisation of vulnerable populations, the interface of the criminal justice and mental health systems and trauma-informed approaches to policy and services.