Ecomapping Report:

Building Safer Communities Fund
Prepared by pipikwan pêhtâkwan

Project Overview

pipikwan pêhtâkwan has been contracted by the City of Edmonton to support the Developmental Phase of the Building Safer Communities Fund. This phase of the project (March-June 2023) scans the current root causes in Edmonton related to gang/gun violence to inform and make recommendations for community-based prevention and intervention strategies that have or will have the biggest impact on reducing gang/gun violence.

The purpose of the ecosystem map is to scan the programs across Edmonton that are currently addressing the issues of gang violence and the capacity in which they serve this issue. This map outlines the different programs offered, the services provided, and highlights the gaps in programming in the city.

Methodology

With a stakeholder list provided by the City of Edmonton, pipikwan pêhtâkwan conducted outreach to various organizations, agencies and government services to find what programming existed to serve the populations involved or at risk of involvement with gun and gang violence.

The team at pipikwan pêhtâkwan relied on keeoukaywin or "the visiting way" to centre visiting in the approach to each interview. Through processes like placing ourselves, sharing our connections to our communities, and giving equal opportunity to share perspectives in circle process, we were able to maintain this approach and hopefully start relationships in a way that can be maintained beyond this project.

The following questions were asked in the interviews that informed this work:

- Does your organization directly address the issue of gun and gang violence? In what capacity?
- Do any of your programs have a gang-specific mandate?
- What services does your organization provide that would be considered preventative for people involved in gangs?
- What ages does it serve?

Definitions

Defining prevention and intervention was the first step in the process of scanning the city for programming. Through a literature review conducted in tandem with the ecosystem map, pipikwan pêhtâkwan came to the following definitions.

Prevention-based

As outlined in the Literature Review Document (2023), the root causes and risk factors for gang involvement are listed as: poverty, inequality, racism, mental illness, social isolation, substance abuse, extremist ideologies, access to affordable housing, education and health, exposure to violence, trauma, lack of positive community influence and peer pressure.

We acknowledge that much of the social programming across the city is considered preventative and contributes to providing alternative community to gangs. However, due to the complexity of the issue and the growing number of people involved in gangs, we chose to narrow the scope of the ecosystem mapping and focus on programming with a specific mandate to prevent gang activity or programming that frequently specifically supports or works with folks who are involved in gangs.
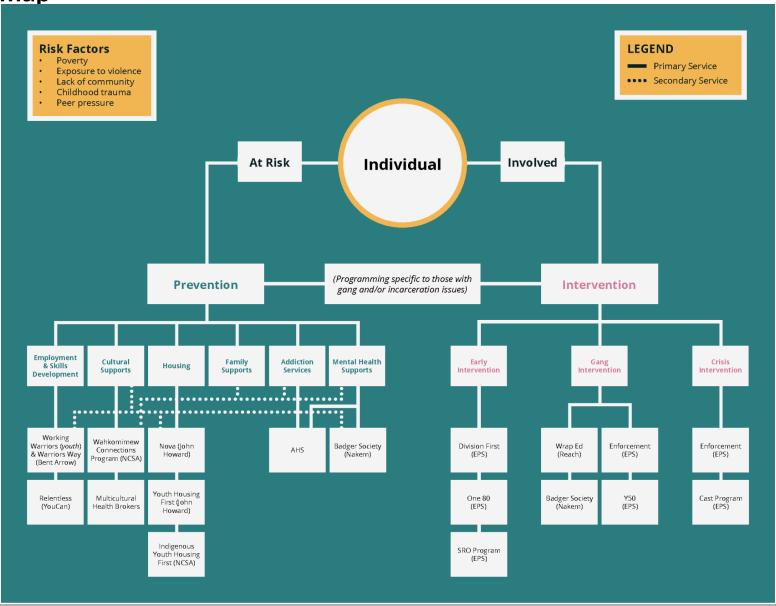
Prevention services

- Skill Development Services: This includes helping individuals build skills to complete their education, build their resume, seek employment, and learn skills like cooking, budgeting, etc. Many individuals do not have these skills which can be a barrier to participating in essential parts of the community.
- Housing: Housing provides stability. Without access to adequate, affordable, and stable housing, people may be drawn to seek alternative accommodations or means of acquiring resources and sometimes end up relying on gangs to provide for them.
- Positive Community Outlets: Access to art-based programming, sports, neighbourhood gardening, green spaces, after-school programs, etc. are all elements of community building that are needed to provide alternative options to gang activity.
- Employment: Unemployment and lack of income are major contributors to individuals seeking out community in gangs. Services that help individuals build skills and find long-term and secure employment are essential in the prevention landscape.
- Family Support Services: Many at-risk individuals did not grow up in stable family support systems and may require support to learn how a healthy family dynamic functions. Services with family counselling and support for parents are an essential part in preventing an individual from searching for community in gangs.
- Cultural Support Services: Due to the diversity of communities involved in gangs across Edmonton, the ability to access the appropriate cultural resources is part of fostering community. This includes programming that understands the unique dynamics, challenges, and opportunities of these communities and provides culturally informed responses.
- Mental Health Services: At-risk individuals have often been exposed to violence and trauma and may struggle with mental health problems. Access to trauma-informed mental health programming is essential for healing the individual's relationship to self.
- Addiction Services: Because at-risk individuals may self-medicate with substances, access to addiction services with a trauma-informed lens is an important element of prevention work.
- It should be noted that although the Edmonton Police Service provides essential educational resources on gangs which is necessary to preventative work, their roles typically begin at the point of intervention, or, once criminal activity is already underway and therefore are not included in the prevention services according to the definitions given in the literature review.

Intervention-based

Programming with a specific mandate to intervene with individuals already involved in or participating in gang activity. Intervention strategies seek to reduce the criminal activities of gangs by pulling individuals away from gangs. There are currently very few programs in Edmonton that have a specific gang intervention mandate. These programs include the partnerships that form WRAP ED, and the programs in the Edmonton Police Service's (EPS) Young People Support Branch. Intervention-based services in Edmonton are heavily enforcement based with nearly all programming being in the hands of the Police.

Ecomap

Risk Factors
- Poverty
- Exposure to violence
- Lack of community
- Childhood trauma
- Peer pressure

LEGEND
— Primary Service
•••• Secondary Service

Individual

At Risk — Involved

Prevention — *(Programming specific to those with gang and/or incarceration issues)* — **Intervention**

Employment & Skills Development	Cultural Supports	Housing	Family Supports	Addiction Services	Mental Health Supports

Working Warriors (*youth*) & Warriors Way (Bent Arrow)

Wahkomimew Connections Program (NCSA)

Nova (John Howard)

AHS

Badger Society (Nakem)

Relentless (YouCan)

Multicultural Health Brokers

Youth Housing First (John Howard)

Indigenous Youth Housing First (NCSA)

Early Intervention	Gang Intervention	Crisis Intervention

Division First (EPS)

Wrap Ed (Reach)

Enforcement (EPS)

Enforcement (EPS)

One 80 (EPS)

Badger Society (Nakem)

Y50 (EPS)

Cast Program (EPS)

SRO Program (EPS)

Analysis

The scan and interviews pointed to the gaps in services provided throughout the Edmonton area. The following themes were identified.

Prevention-based supports are not easily accessible to many at-risk individuals.

The services across the city are not always accessible to people without the ability to travel easily between them. Specifically for youth who do not have transportation and who may have negative relationships with transit, the ability to access services in one place is important to people who may struggle with time-management skills and transportation barriers.

Recommendation
Community-based spaces spread out evenly across the city with the ability to access most or all services in-house.

There are no intervention or prevention programs specific to marginalized communities outside of Indigenous and youth-based programming.

There are no specific programs available for genders other than men, who are wanting to exit gangs in the city. Women, trans and non-binary people face different risks and complications when trying to leave gangs. Other prioritized groups like immigrant and refugee communities, do not have the resources or funding needed for their specific cultural concerns which complicates the ability to leave gangs. These groups often need extra support.

Recommendation
Programs that cater to the needs of marginalized communities involved in gang activity are a necessary element of reducing gang activity. There is a need for safe spaces where people can go to get away from dangerous living situations.

Not enough low-barrier housing programs are available for high-risk or gang-involved people.

Although housing programs are available across the city, spaces are limited and long wait times mean that people are not getting access when they need it urgently. Further barriers exist for people who may be perceived as dangerous due to their gang affiliation. Without housing, instability compounds for individuals who may be experiencing other issues like finding employment, mental health or addiction supports.

Low barrier housing can be described as housing programs that do not place barriers on individuals who experience addiction, mental illness, or who may be perceived as dangerous due to incarceration or proximity to gangs.

Recommendation
Consider low-barrier housing programs and spaces that cater to the needs of those who struggle with mental health, addiction, gang violence or incarceration issues as an important part of wraparound supports.

Long wait times mean that people are being turned away from the help they need.

The ability to respond in a timely manner is important when addressing the complexities of trying to exit the gang lifestyle. Many individuals need immediate support, housing, mental health and addiction services. Most of these critical services have wait times spanning months. In that time, individuals may go back to the gang lifestyle because it provides for their basic needs and gives them a sense of community.

> ### Recommendation
> Address the underfunding of critical services like housing programs, mental health and addictions programs so that basic needs can be addressed in real-time.

Heavy enforcement programming may be a barrier to individuals wanting to leave gangs.

Nearly all existing programming in Edmonton that supports people exiting gangs is operated by or in partnership with the Edmonton Police Service (EPS). Although police officers may be first responders to violent situations and surveillance, they are not trained to be experts in harm reduction, de-escalation, social work, mental health or addiction crisis. Because police are often called to intervene in violent or crisis situations, individuals in gangs may not be able to overcome the distrust that inevitably comes from those interactions and therefore may not pursue programming that is linked to the EPS.

> ### Recommendation
> More community-led, neighbourhood-specific programming that addresses the needs of the immediate community surrounding it. Supports should focus on relationship and trust-building, not criminalization.

Conclusion

The accompanying map provides an overview of existing gaps in services that exist within Edmonton. This tool is meant to support and inform decision-makers on recommendations to fill those gaps.

- There is no gang-specific programming outside of the downtown core. Most preventative services exist downtown as well.
- No housing programming with a specific mandate to house folks looking to leave gangs.
- No gang-specific programming for women or other marginalized gender groups.
- No training or educational tools to support schools in the city to know how to deal with youth in gangs.
- Only one community-led program run by folks with lived experience exists in Edmonton and as of report submissions, is not funded.