Building Safer Communities Fund:

Engagement Report

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The City of Edmonton has been allocated funds from Public Safety Canada's Building Safer Community Fund (BSCF), which is designed to help municipalities and Indigenous communities prevent gun and gang violence by tackling its root causes. The City of Edmonton is completing a Developmental Phase to develop a deeper understanding of the gaps, needs and current ecosystem of initiatives on gang/guns in Edmonton through ecosystem mapping, data collection and literature review.

pipikwan pêhtâkwan was contracted by the City of Edmonton to support the Developmental Phase of the BSCF, to facilitate engagement sessions, conduct a literature review/environmental scan, and assemble an ecosystem map. This deliverable reflects the engagement activities, a summary of what was heard, and key findings from the engagement. This document exists in conversation with the Literature Review and Ecosystem Map, and is summarized alongside these other pieces in the 'BSCF: Deliverables Summary Report'.

Summary of Findings

The following were identified in the engagement as key priorities, and are expanded upon in the Key Findings section of the report.

- Develop Trust and Relationships
- Increase Funding and Capacity
- Centre Community Driven Solutions
- Expand Partnerships with Schools
- Build Prevention Awareness Tools
- Focus on Root Causes

Engagement Overview

In May and June 2023, pipikwan pêhtâkwan worked with the City of Edmonton and the BSCF Steering Committee to engage with over 33 people from 26 organizations, through multiple facilitated group conversations (focus groups) and interviews.

A mix of perspectives were heard from the sector and community, ranging from those in leadership positions, front-line roles, on-the-ground service providers, and community leaders.

The goal of these engagement activities was to listen to community perspectives on the issue of gun and gang violence. The findings will be used to inform recommendations for community-based prevention and intervention strategies that have or will have the biggest impact on reducing gang/gun violence, and how the BSCF funding should be prioritized in Edmonton.

Methodology

pipikwan pêhtâkwan centered Indigenous research methodology in this project, *keeoukaywin*, or 'the visiting-way'. keeoukaywin centers Métis and Cree ways of being, and presents a practical and meaningful way to conduct research. Built from a concept developed by Shaun Wilson in *Research is Ceremony* (2009), keeoukaywin emphasizes the importance of both relationality and interconnectedness between researchers and those they research, to build lasting relationships rooted in trust and reciprocity. This approach takes into consideration the importance of conversation and connection, and acknowledges the way these connections manifest in the outcomes of the work. It is relational and rooted in a deep care for the communities engaged.

This was difficult at times, given the subject matter and complex relationships and interests in this social issues. Navigating these conversations in a way that supported both participants and the consultants meant creating spaces for debriefing and processing challenging information, particularly when speaking about the direct impacts of this violence on the community.

Approach

- Focus Groups
  - Three focus groups were held with staff from community organizations who provide services directly or indirectly in support of gang-involved youth. Invitations were sent to staff from 15 organizations, with 11 of those organizations participating.
  - One focus group was held with staff from government organizations. These included individuals involved in gang suppression and diversion (EPS), youth justice programs (EPS), young offender management (EPS), the Government of Alberta (Alberta Community Safety Analytics Lab, Children's Services), and Edmonton Catholic School District.
  - A complete list of these participants is provided in Appendix A.
- One-on-one Interviews
  - These were provided to ensure flexible opportunities for participation, recognizing that participants might feel more comfortable speaking privately about their experiences and ideas.
  - These interviews were conducted where people felt most comfortable, including in-person, phone, and video calls.
  - four (4), 1-hour long virtual visiting interviews were conducted with staff from several organizations who were unable to attend the focus groups.
  - three (3), 1-hour long virtual visiting interviews were conducted with a few cultural community leaders. While not exhaustive, it provided an important snapshot to help inform this work.

Participants

Decisions on who to engage with were guided by the Building Safer Communities Fund Steering Committee and pre-existing relationships of steering committee members. Due to limitations of time,

relationships, and trust, most of the engagement that was conducted was with those working at the level of service providers (ranging from those in leadership to front-line staff), policy-makers and researchers, and community leadership. This included diverse voices from:

- Small, community-based organizations to large non-profits
- Government and health agencies
- Schools
- Indigenous-led organizations

- Organizations serving communities of African descent
- Multicultural organizations
- High-risk youth organizations, and organizations working more broadly with youth

Trust and relationships are crucial to the engagement process on any topic, and were especially important given the sensitive nature of this project. This meant engagement efforts focused on organizations and individuals with pre-existing relationships with the City's Safe and Healthy Communities Steering Committee. A snowball approach was taken to further outreach, with pipikwan pêhtâkwan reaching out to individuals suggested throughout the project by members of the steering committee, and one connection leading to another. We acknowledge that further engagement will be integral to the future of this project.

Questions

1. What initiatives are communities utilizing to prevent and intervene in gun and gang violence?
2. What impacts are gun and gang activities having on communities and the city?
3. How might future BSCF funding be used?
4. How might we develop solutions, and who needs to be part of creating those solutions?

What Was Heard

While the engagement process could not be described as exhaustive, it was able to surface key themes that are illustrative of the realities and ideas that exist within the community. The most important part of further and deeper engagement is trust. With this topic in particular, there is a lot of pre-existing mistrust: between communities and law enforcement, between individuals and systems, and between different actors within these systems. At the same time, many passionate, caring people are working hard and doing their very best to support youth, families, and individuals who want to see them thrive and be safe.

This is an extremely complicated issue. Public safety, the safety of community workers, and the safety of individuals and families need to be balanced with understanding the root causes that influence individuals to become involved in gang and gun activities, and which make it very difficult for them to exit.

Navigating these conversations was challenging because the community, institutions and systems being worked with have very different worldviews. There were points of commonality on what the issues are, but not necessarily unity in the suggestions for solutions.

Many voices shared that it takes time to build trust, and nearly everyone identified that they want to see

youth voices included and lived experience voices included. Despite this, that approach was rarely reflected in practice. Flexibility and time are needed to come up with solutions to complex things.

This summary does not identify specific ethnic or cultural communities to protect the identities and create space for those communities to represent themselves in this conversation as they wish.

How are Gun and Gang Activities Impacting Edmonton?

There is a sense that gun and gang activities are increasingly impacting communities, youth, families, and the staff who work with them. Service providers working with youth shared that there is an increasing impact of guns and gangs, and an increasing amount of fear, and decreasing perception of safety in the community, and among youth. Service providers are also being impacted by the moral weight of this issue.

> *"It creates an internal battle for front-line workers. We want to help, but the problem is so big. How do I make a difference when the systems are so big? The impacts are on individuals, families, communities, systems, partners, everyone".*

The impacts of gun and gang activities are being felt deeply and specifically in some of Edmonton's cultural communities. A few key stories of violence, which had been in the media recently, have shaken communities (both geographic and cultural) and families, and left them fearful and grieving. One community saw a family lose two sons to gun violence in the span of 6-months, with suspicions that it was also gang-related. This type of violence is new to this particular cultural community. This sense of fear impacts youth too.

> *"As a community member, we can see the impact. The incident sent fear to the people who live in the area, neighbours, fear to the family, to the victim, they wonder who will be targeted next. It could be a mistaken identity. The whole community is afraid. And this is not the first time."*

These incidents have also prompted some communities to come together and form their own committees and strategies for addressing the problem and solutions.

What are the Gaps and What Needs to Change?

Lack of Capacity, Funding and Resources

Competitive funding is putting a strain on the relationships between communities due to organizations competing for the same pot of money.

Acknowledge and Increase Support for Community-Based Service Providers

Smaller, community-based organizations such as Nék'em, which are rooted in community and lived experience, are having a hard time accessing funding streams. Community-led initiatives feel that city and government-funded youth services fall short of the needs of youth. Youth need mentorship by people with lived experience. Many youths struggle to leave gangs because their families and communities are entwined in gangs. The current existing programs for youth discriminate against them for coming from these types of backgrounds because of the behavioural issues that come with them. The youth do not need to be pushed away, they need to be brought in to access resources, and

alternative communities. At-risk youth often find themselves leaving unsafe homes, and being released from incarceration or treatment without any support which results in a cycle of relapse or recidivism. Funding could be used to create life skill classes to teach clients how to be self-sustaining. A harm reduction and community-based approach to programming, ensures clients are met by mentors and front-line workers who have lived experience that they can relate to. A goal of some of these community-led programs is to give people who are trying to leave gangs the opportunity to make money outside of drugs and sex work.

Lack of Youth Focused Supports

Housing is a particularly challenging resource for youth to access. Most shelters and resource centers are for adults, leaving youth with few places to go where they can be supported. There are gaps in housing access throughout the city, as youth are discriminated against when applying for housing. Further, the wait times can take years, and when they do access housing the placement is far away from the services that they need.

Participants stated the need for counseling and mentorship services for youth. Another issue is the lack of immediate resources— waitlists are often discouraging and can have youth go backwards in their journeys. Access to proper identification and documentation is needed for healthcare and education services but many youth do not have them and may need support in getting them. Further barriers include poor relationships between youth and the Edmonton Transit Service. Some youth are banned from transit, meaning they are unable to make important appointments. With too many barriers to accessing the services they need, youth eventually stop attempting to access these types of services.

Having a violent offence on their record creates additional barriers to accessing services for youth. There is a stigma around safety and well-being for staff around youth who are gang members.

> *"With a violent offence on record, say with a gun, agencies won't take them, placements won't take them, forget it, they think they have to keep staff safe. So this adds to barriers for kids. That's why we had to create another program. youth are not being accepted at traditional health services".*

While some service providers said that the risk can be real, they also asked, *"What is a tolerable risk, and what is intolerable?".*

There is a gap in services and supports for younger kids, especially under 14 years old. Gang involvement is starting to come up more and more in schools and in younger kids. Services are not there for this age group. It is difficult to find appropriate housing, and mental health supports for this age group.

There is a need to see more safe spaces for youth to go to. There are not enough spaces for youth to build healthy communities. There is a lack of spaces where youth can go to be safe, and hang out in the city. Youth services are not distributed equally across the city, there is a need for more neighbourhood-based options. Youth need space to be youth where they are invited in, supported and not judged for their backgrounds or situations.There needs to be spaces with less police presence and partnerships as youth find these programs discriminatory which pushes them away rather than bringing them in where they need it.

More spaces across the city like YESS or iHuman need to exist as safe community connection points for youth. Spaces like iHuman operate in a harm reduction approach, providing youth with a space to

access art and culture while feeling safe, supported and not judged. This space provides youth with supports such as health care, access to getting identification and other important documents, job search and addictions services.

Schools are a key connection point for youth, however there is no consistent way for community organizations and agencies doing gang prevention work to offer their services in schools to support the most at-risk youth. There is a need for gun and violence determent educational programs to understand the dangers and alternatives to these issues. One of the current challenges and gaps named by many people is how to get into Edmonton Public Schools.

> *"They'll identify certain schools, with stats, to identify where services are needed. But since SROs are no longer there, what services and supports are they providing? How can a community agency get in there to support?"*

Family Involvement, Where Possible

There is a need to look at engagement with families and offer support and services to both families and youth. In some cases, there is intergenerational involvement and youth are involved in gangs because their family members are.

> *"There can be the greatest impact on [the] community if you address kids who have a couple [of] generations of connection to gangs [and] violence".*

Other youth may have grown up in care and don't have family, so there is a need to help make connections to the community, and to healthy family and found family members. For youth who have families, it's important to work with family, to give the child a different path, so they don't get into the same position.

> *"How do we give them the tools to empower them to take a different path. How do you walk away from what your family is involved in?"*

It's important to work to support the family in other ways, such as helping them with bills, financial management, healing circles, access to elders. In some cases, families don't even know that their youth are at-risk or involved in gangs and gun violence, or it is a source of shame and they do not want to talk about it. This is where support that meets families where they are at may be important, including the roles of community leaders, faith leaders, Elders, and schools.

The Need for Gang Exit Programs and Harm Reduction Approaches

There is a major need for gang exit programming as well as preventive measures to spread awareness about gang involvement, the long term effects, and how to leave and stay out of gangs. Within these programs are the need for life skills and employment skills development and opportunities. These programs will help to ensure people are able to stay out of gangs and make a living in a new way. There is also a need for individual support for persons exiting gangs to access supports that are not just programming such as financial support for tattoo removal, clothing replacements to drop gang colours, access to safe housing, relocation supports, and food allowance.

There is a crucial need for a harm reduction approach when working with persons involved in gang lifestyle, there is a need for shelters where people need a safe place to go when they leave unsafe living

conditions, and witness protection style support when exiting gangs to ensure people do not get met with violence or death regarding exits.

There is also a gap in gang-exit programming for older individuals. For example, one program that no longer exists and has left a potential gap in supports, GECOS, focused on individuals 30-years-old and under.

Lack of coordination between systems within gang prevention, intervention and exit

There is a need for a "gang mandate" that would guide governments and their members on how to address gang prevention, intervention and awareness in decision-making and lobbying efforts. Developed programs are finding it difficult to build relationships with youth due to their transiency and the quick turnover in staff and programming. While governments and authorities want to assist in helping young offenders find a better path, there has to be a balance between that and public safety. There is a need for quicker access to rehab and gang exit programming so that people can get help when they need it most. As well as the need for post-programming supports such as access to housing, clothing and groceries to start up again safely. To understand the depth and solutions to these types of problems there needs to be greater collaboration and alignment in both vision of the strategy, and coordination of responses. This would also need to reflect appropriate resourcing.

A Need for More Culturally Responsive, Community-Driven Programming and Resources

Traditional, and culture-based programs are important. While engagement was not extensive enough to understand which particular cultural supports are needed, and ethnic/cultural/racial demographics are sensitive and challenging to report on (and thus out of the scope of this report), we did hear that there are shifts in the ethnic/cultural/racial demographics of individuals involved in gun and gang activities. There are gaps in culturally appropriate services, and there are also cultural communities who are new to seeing gun and gang activities among their community members, and who are thus not experienced with accessing programs and resources that are available.

> *"The gang exit presentation offered by EPS is lacking (outdated information, improper education about substance use, why gangs exist, etc.). Harmful information because these are the folks advocating for funding, [and] educating the broader public, creates more stigma. Incorrect information about Indigenous focus (e.g. Red Alert, is a street-level gang, not more prolific like Hells Angels), but are getting disproportionately highlighted. Lack of empathy and understanding for Indigenous context".*

Lack of support for newcomers, especially refugees. The settlement system is broken.

It is essential to look at root factors and complex causes, and the way that many families and individuals are failed by the settlement process.

> *"It's not the crime, it's the factors behind the crime that force people to go for crime".*

The government brings in refugees but is not supporting them when they get here. They face language barriers, educational barriers, and employment barriers. Families struggle and break down and parents are losing youth to the punitive system.

"The system is a tree. Police [are] just one branch of the tree. If you cut that branch, there are many other branches that affect the cycle of violence for newcomers. [We] need to look at the whole tree, or the problem will never be solved".

In some cases, families have fled war, and come to Canada as refugees. With many barriers to accessing mental health supports, employment, appropriate educational supports, and language and culture barriers, families are bearing so much stress - from the burdens of economic pressures and poverty, separations and divorces and single-parent homes, to seeing children struggle in school because the school system is not equipped to understand the experiences and educational gaps of refugees. These experiences are all related to root causes.

"The system…failed us, in many cases. I came here as a refugee [and] was shot. Nobody talked to me about whether I had PTSD [or] mental health problems at all. When people are brought to this country, when people tell you a story when they are coming, [the] system doesn't follow up with newcomers. If you bring a family coming from a war-torn country with child soldiers, if they are coming in, I believe the system should be able to take care of them from the beginning".

Community-Police Relationships Need to Shift.

There is a need for a shift to more open, trusting, collaborative relationships between community organizations/communities and Edmonton Police Services. Some organizations spoke about the importance of partnerships and relationships, between community organizations and police, but that there is a need to be able to work together in a different way.

"Being able to work with Edmonton Police in a different way, being able to have an open type of relationship".

Some spoke about distrust of the police: the lack of trust between gang members, or community members, and the police. This included things like there being too much police presence, and that there is a need for initiatives that are not driven by the police. Others shared that their community has had little past contact with police, but now that they are experiencing it more and question whether they are receiving fair treatment from both the police and the justice system. There were questions about whether violence in their community is being investigated fairly.

How Should the Funding Be Used?

Organizations and agencies should have more agency over how to use funding, in general, for it to be effective. Funding needs to be flexible, long-term, adaptable, stable, and as unrestricted as possible.

"One of the challenges we have with funding is restrictions, e.g. with one funding stream, we can't pay for their housing, so we had to apply to all these different funds to meet different needs. If the funding didn't have those restrictions, if agencies could determine how to use the funding, that would help, e.g. use a portion to be able to pay for food, housing, clothing, to relocate someone."

"Programs are constantly pivoting, barriers because of constant change within programs, changing staff, turnover, funding barriers creates gaps and dysfunction and disconnect, people are overworked, scrambling".

Increased access to wrap-around supports, including housing, mental health services, addictions services, transportation and harm-reduction services. Community-based wrap-around programs, and outreach, to be able to connect people to services that support their needs, when they need them. A comprehensive approach with direct access to other systems.

> **Examples to Inspire:**
> - Drug Treatment Court is an example of a wrap-around support system in the judicial system. The program is intended to break the cycle of criminal behavior driven by drug addiction, by offering participants a chance to avoid prison and complete a drug treatment program in the case of non-violent offences. The wrap-around support system includes judges, lawyers, social workers, probations, community workers, and has shown some success.
> - Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society's programs work together to provide wrap-around support with the prevention, intervention, family engagement, cultural connections, and community resources.

Trust and invest in community organizations, including the small ones, with flexible approaches to funding allocation. Trust and work with community leaders and faith leaders. They know the dynamics of their community, but also strengths, and assets, and can have more impact. Communities have really effective institutions, religious institutions, in addressing gun and gang violence. Fund community organizations to do the basic programs (that may already exist) that they do within their community will help with prevention. Or to do their own community engagement within their communities.

These might be programs that don't seem directly related to crime prevention on the surface, but that could have big impacts: like a homework club, a sports club, or specific crime prevention programs, creating community gardens or a cooking program that could enhance skill building through cooking, preparing, preserving food. A lot of community organizations are very equipped with how to work with their community members but don't have the resources.

> *"In our system, we don't trust communities with money. We give the money to big monster organizations. It divides communities, [and] harms communities. [The] impacts of giving small grants to communities during COVID was huge. Money must not go to "monster" organizations. Trust us that we can administer. Trust people, you can have measures to make sure people are accountable, but be open, working in community, things can change. You give me money to do things, and I see another way, a cultural way, that things can be different to implement".*

> **Example to Inspire:** The Sierra Leone Association is beginning work to consult with members of their community, to understand the root causes, and how gun and gang violence are impacting the community, and come up with strategies to address them.

> **Example to Inspire:** Nék̓em offers a program called 'Badger Society' that supports Indigenous men and masculine people in addressing cycles of trauma and violence. This is done through recommitment to Indigenous traditions, strengthening connection in urban Indigenous communities, promoting respect for women, Two-Spirit, and LGBTQ+ people, and developing life skills.

Create resources, such as a toolkit or other supports that can be provided to schools and youth-serving organizations with resources, training, tools, and presentations for gang prevention.

Community organizations are receiving requests to develop materials for caregivers of youth for staying out of gangs or getting out of gangs. There is a need for resources directed at youth for staff at schools, caregivers, drop-in programs, etc., so staff can be prepared with resources and knowledge to handle these conversations. Package delivered to schools with a toolkit for gang prevention tools and education.

> *"When we started [our program], Edmonton Public was part of the partnership [and] they were able to offer an educational component on-site at [our office]. A teacher who was seconded from Edmonton Public came to [our organization] three times a week to do core courses - English, Math, and Social...in our youth programming room, so youth could get credits through being involved in [our] programs. The success was phenomenal. Then EPSB could no longer fund that component on site, so it went away".*

> *"The money won't last forever. How do we make sure [the] work lasts forever".*

Example to Inspire: The education aspect of the Calgary Gang Strategy includes a campaign in which open-house presentations for citizens, presentations to schools, public awareness activations for vulnerable youth, media education services, and workshops for media and stakeholders are all utilized. This was also reflected in efforts provided by the SAFE Program in the City of Surrey.

Resources for supporting gang-exiting.

Support gang-exiting by covering tangible costs of things that can open doors for gang exiting: peer support on gang-existing (someone who has been through it, older, higher up gang members), tattoo removal, clothes, cellphones.

Convene and find creative ways to collaborate and work together.

Have a "quarterback" at each agency, who is a point-person, works with other agencies, and improves ease of access to different systems, agencies.

Example to Inspire: The 118 Ave Concerns Working Group is a table that is convened to work on community safety solutions. It includes public libraries, schools, youth programs, EPS beat officers, business associations, and families.

Example to Inspire: DIVERSIONfirst connects youth who have committed their first non-violent, criminal occurrence to community and family supports, to help them build a foundation for a positive future away from crime. It's a police-led program, which allows the Edmonton Police Service (EPS) to offer the youth and their supports a restorative justice approach, instead of a criminal charge. This is a partnership between EPS, YMCA of Northern Alberta, and Boy and Girls Club Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Mentoring programs, like lived-experience facilitators, such as Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement (CM3) in the United States. Or leading by example - some of the older gang members want to support youth, don't want to see them continue down the path. Community-based approach to programming, ensures clients are met by mentors and front-line workers who have lived experience that they can relate to.

Vocational rehab, and employment opportunities. Many participants talked about how without employment and income to meet their basic needs, people will fall back into gun and gang activities. And that even if someone is able to secure employment, they may need support to stay employed, given the stigma that can surround them, and the challenges they may face with transitioning to a different lifestyle.

Initiatives that take a harm-reduction approach mitigate risks while meeting people's needs. This approach allows participants to access programs in a way that is safe, supported and non-judgemental. This approach is crucial when working with persons involved in gang lifestyle.

Take the time to understand and consider root causes. Instead of focusing on preventing crime itself, shift to some of the things that lead to crime. This could also look like education for justice workers, EPS, front line workers, on understanding the cycles, barriers, etc. for vulnerable people and be informed by frontline workers. This could look like meaningful investment in how newcomers settle, and are supported to integrate and have their basic needs met.

> *"We need to look at root causes. If we only look at end-product of crime, it's a band-aid solution. Dollars need to go to addressing root causes".*

Meaningful relationships need to be built between communities and law enforcement, *"so it's not just coming to our community to arrest someone"*.

> *"Would love to see our communities work with law enforcement, police, and the corrections system - sometimes, the way justice is being done is totally unfair for Indigenous and Black people. Sometimes it's retaliatory things with the crime, because of the treatment. If respect is given to Black and Indigenous people in our communities, I believe there will be change there."*

The most impacted communities must be involved. Involve communities in the decision making for the grant, grant approval, grant advisory committee, those who are impacted and who are expert in their community's realities, they know the problems, but they also know the strengths. Meeting with community leaders, with the families of victims, hearing from them how this impacts them, learning from them. Some people shared the perspective that programming is top-down and too heavily police led, rather than youth led or lived experience led .

> *"The communities are the stakeholders, the communities are suffering, the one bearing the brunt. We should empower the communities to reach out to their people, help solve the problem. Open it up to different community organizations.. Run it the same way the City runs the EIRC grant".*

What and Who Needs to Be Part of Creating Solutions?

We engaged with people coming from different standpoints, from large enforcement organizations, to

grassroots community groups, with different accompanying worldviews. There were points of commonality on what the issues are, but not necessarily unity in the suggestions for solutions. What was unifying was the commitment and passion shared by service providers and community leaders, to see youth and community members healthy, safe and successful. However, they had different ideas about how to get there. With that said, there were also several common themes that came up with nearly everyone we spoke with.

Trust is key.
- *"But if someone comes from the City, nobody shows up, they don't trust you. But if I'm calling that meeting about how to prevent crime in our community, people know us, love us, trust us, we have children in the community. You come in, you don't have children in my community, why are you talking about my community".*

Programs need to be rooted in the wisdom of community, community-driven, developed from the ground-up.
- It is important to involve youth, and solutions be youth-led. Nearly everyone said: 'include youth voices, find out what youth need, not telling them what they need. Youth-led, youth-focussed programs that empower.
- Ethnocultural communities have to be involved, one way or another, to reach people. A broker model could be important. It is easier to reach the community through community workers.
- *"Brokers and community workers have relationships, trust - they are big supporters of families, school, housing. Stranger coming into the community, it will take time, people might not share their real issues. But if you have someone in the community who knows the issues, knows the family, that will be easier.* **REACH used to have cultural community navigators,** *a broker or navigator, community connector, and speak the language of the community".*
- *"We can address our own community, our own people, from there we can influence others, because we have connections to other communities, other cultures, friends, relationships."*

Community organizations and service providers want to be involved in next steps.
- *"Please keep including us in these conversations, there are a lot of ways for our organization to support this work. We want to be part of this. We need the tools to do our job. Keep including folks in our position as close to this as possible. We want to understand how we can be of service to pushing forward this work".*

It is important for the BSCF Committee and City of Edmonton to be able to create meaningful commitments, reciprocity in relationships, and demonstrate action and impact.
- *"I hope this won't be a project only on paper. At least to save one child"*
- Collaborative approaches with community and agencies working with government services and community.

Cultural sensitivity/safety, and access to the appropriate cultural and traditional supports for different community members.

- *"Support the whole kid, not silo parts of their wellbeing".*

- Take a holistic approach.

Key Findings

Develop Trust and Relationships

Trust and relationships were identified as the most important starting point for making this work impactful, meaningful, and legitimate. There is a demonstrated willingness from community partners to build that trust with system partners, with the expectation it is reciprocated.

- Trust and invest in community organizations, including the small ones, with flexible approaches to funding allocation. Trust and work with community leaders and faith leaders.
- This was heard clearly from marginalized communities more broadly, who have had broken trust with systems in their communities.
- Identify clear pathways for establishing and maintaining relationships between the City of Edmonton, committee members, and the community organizations working in this sector.
- A unified and clear vision of the work will be integral to developing and maintaining trust with the community. This includes the scope of the Building Safer Communities Fund, vision and outcomes for the project.
- Build upon existing work in community organizations, or support those organizations doing the work in both formal and informal capacities. Examples of existing work includes:
  - Youth Agencies Collaborative (YAC).
  - WRAPEd.
  - Community-based committees addressing gun and gang violence across the city.

Increase Funding and Capacity

Nearly everyone we spoke with shared the perspectives that organizations and agencies should have more agency over how to use funding, in general, for it to be effective. Funding needs to be flexible, long-term, adaptable, stable, and as unrestricted as possible:

- Build upon existing paths of City funding, like FCSS and EIRC grants and explore how this funding may be used in new ways to build connections and collaborations between new partners in community, or system and community partners.
- Support organizations to do their own community research, which may lead to new solutions. There is a gap in documented specialized research on communities within Edmonton, and multiyear long-term research is still needed.
- Funding may go further in the hands of smaller organizations and community organizations, resource them to lead these initiatives themselves.
- Create opportunities for feedback to funding agencies and partners. There is a need for longer-term flexible funding that prioritizes community-based organizations that may not have non-profit status.
- Grant administration is a barrier to accessing funding. Connect community groups with other funding opportunities within the City of Edmonton and other granting bodies in the community.
- Processes like the Participatory Budget Montréal: 2nd edition may be considered as opportunities to explore. The City earmarked $30 million to implement projects proposed and selected by community members around the themes of youth, equity and safety.

Centre Community-Driven Solutions

While the communities relationship to Edmonton Police Service was recognized for its complexity, many of the existing resourced responses originate from policing. There was an identified need to center community-driven solutions, recognizing EPS as a crucial partner in this work.

- Center and elevate the voices of the most impacted communities. This includes youth, Indigenous People, and communities of African-descent. This means recognizing that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach.
- *"Youth needs to be involved in so many of these discussions. Yes, you're talking to me, I want you to talk to youth".*
- A 'Community Table' that guides decision-making and implementation of Phase 2 emerged as an opportunity to center these voices. This approach could be built from the existing stakeholder list in the engagement work and added to by the BSCF Committee. They could support in identifying voices and community priorities, potentially review applications for granting or the evaluation of impact and create an on-going space for knowledge sharing and engagement. These participants should be compensated for their time and have access to mental health supports due to the sensitive nature of the work.

Expand Partnerships with Schools

Schools were repeatedly identified as crucial partners, from both community organizations and government agencies. Schools are a key connection point for kids and youth.

- There is no consistent way for community organizations and agencies providing supports to get into schools to support the most at risk youth. Specifically, one of the current challenges and gaps named by many people is how to get into Edmonton Public Schools. The Edmonton Catholic School District does have some programming in place, but it is not enough.
- There may be specific policy restrictions that limit this access that should be explored further to support collaborative responses.

  "They'll identify certain schools, with stats, to identify where services are needed. But since SROs are no longer there, what services and supports are they providing? How can a community agency get in there to support?"

Build Prevention Awareness Tools

There is a need for educational and awareness building resources for a broad range of community and systems stakeholders in Edmonton. This includes schools, families and community groups. These should be designed by community-based organizations and reflect the community's perspectives and lived experiences.

- Community organizations are receiving requests to develop presentations for caregivers of youth to encourage them to stay out of gangs, or to exit gangs.
- Organizations, schools, and families feel unprepared for these conversations, and are seeking these resources so they can better navigate these conversations with youth in their lives.
- One identified opportunity was a toolkit that could be provided to schools and youth serving organizations with resources, training, tools, and presentations on gang prevention.

- Some strong examples of tools include the City of Surrey's SAFE Program, providing multilingual outreach presentations to families in public spaces, or the Calgary Gang Strategy's campaign with open-house presentations for the community. This approach includes presentations to schools, public awareness activations for youth, media education services, and workshops for stakeholders.

Focus on Root Causes

Take the time to understand and consider root causes: Instead of focusing on preventing crime itself, shift to some of the things that lead to crime. This could also look like education for justice workers, EPS, front line workers, on understanding the cycles, barriers etc for vulnerable people. Other examples provided from the engagement included meaningful investment in how newcomers settle and integration supports to have their basic needs met.

> *"We need to look at root causes. If we only look at the end-product of crime, it's a band-aid solution. Dollars need to go to addressing root causes".*

Appendices

Appendix A: Engagement Participants

Community Organizations

- Africa Centre
- Bent Arrow
- Big Brothers Big Sisters
- Boyle Street
- iHuman
- EmployAbilities
- Family Futures Resource Network
- Free Play for Kids
- FRAP (Francophonie Albertaine Plurielle)
- Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers
- John Howard
- Multicultural Health Brokers

- Native Counselling Services
- Neighbourhood Empowerment Team
- REACH
- Sierra Leone Association
- WRAPed (including staff from Native Counselling Services, MCHB, REACH, John Howard Society, YOUCan)
- YESS
- YouCan
- The Family Centre
- Nékʼem

Government Organizations

- Alberta Health Services, Mental Health and Addictions
- Alberta Justice, Solicitor General

- Edmonton Catholic School District
- Edmonton Police Services
- Alberta Children's Services

Appendix B: Large Group Facilitation Guide

Time	Activity	Description
20 minutes	Welcome & Introductions	**Welcome** Have each person introduce themselves by the following: • Name • Role • Place themselves
10 minutes	Overview of Project	**Overview of Focus Group + Project Background** • Questions from participants
20 minutes	EcoSystem Map	**Share overview of ecosystem mapping, and ask for feedback.** • 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 org provide that would be considered preventative for people involved in gangs? ○ (skill development, family supports, cultural supports etc.) • What ages does it serve?

20 minutes	Discussion Part 1	**Discussion Questions** ● What initiatives are communities utilizing to prevent and intervene in gun and gang violence? ● How do you see gang and gun activities impacting the community, the city? ● What are the gaps? What needs to change?

20 minutes	Discussion Part 2	**Discussion Questions**
		1) How might the BCSF funding be used?
		    a) What ideas do you have for community-led projects to prevent violence among young people who are involved in gangs, or at risk of joining them?
		2) Who needs to be part of creating solutions?
		    a) How can we create safe spaces for young people/those who need to be involved, to drive solutions?
		    b) What might be some barriers to implementing these solutions?
		    c) Imagine that the BCSF fund has worked, ten years from now, what would things look like?
		    d) Where do you think funding will make the biggest impact on reductions of gangs/guns violence within Edmonton?

10 minutes	Closing Circle	**Everyone has the opportunity to speak** ● What is one hope you are taking away from this conversation? ● Is there anything else you'd like to share before we finish the focus group?
5 minutes	Next Steps	**Describe next steps and anonymity**

Appendix C: Suggestions for Next Steps for Lived Experience Engagement

What follows are some questions and suggestions to support the project team in planning for any further engagement or involvement of individuals with lived experience of gun and gang violence. Throughout the engagement process, there are many different ways that people spoke about work needing to be led by the people most impacted by both the issues of gun and gang violence, and who stand to be most impacted by any initiatives to address gun and gang violence. We heard from nearly everyone we spoke to that in further work on the Building Safer Communities Fund (and with any work done by the City in general) engagement and further development of the Building Safer Communities Fund, it is important to involve "lived experience". While many people want to see youth sharing lived experience, nobody really knows how to do this

Build Trust by Building in Time, Flexibility, and Transparency

It is important to note that with such a sensitive, difficult topic, it is especially challenging to build trust, and to find individuals, who are close to it, who are also willing to share their experiences and perspectives. For example, we heard from a community youth worker that it takes them at least a year

to build a good relationship with the youth they work with. In our experience, some things that can help with building trust include: letting relationships take the time they need to develop, being flexible, being transparent and honest about what the knowns and unknowns are. It is ok if you don't have all the answers - just be honest about that.

Some Questions to Guide Your Approach

1. Define what "lived experience" means in the context of this project. What specifically does the lived experience need to be about? Who is doing the engaging and why? How can you meet individuals where they are at, in terms of how they would like to be engaged?

    It is important to reflect on and define specifically what the Project Team means by that. Our suggestions, based on what we heard, include:

    - Youth perspectives, so that solutions can be youth-centred
    - Representatives of cultural and geographic communities and families currently impacted by gun and gang violence (building off the conversations we had with several cultural community leaders).
    - Perspective of individuals with past first-hand involvement in gun and gang activities. It will be very challenging to engage with individuals who are currently involved.

2. What type of involvement are you asking of them? What are you inviting them to participate in, or contribute to? How will their contributions be used? Who stands to benefit from the interaction? Who is at risk of being harmed?

    Decide what level of involvement and what level of influence there is for individuals with "lived experience", and different members of the public/community in future work. There seems to be interest from those we spoke with for being involved in a deeper way, CREATE or even DECIDE. The Project Team and Steering Committee may want to think about what level of involvement you desire (based on the City of Edmonton's Public Engagement Spectrum).

3. Will this be a one-time interaction, or are you seeking to establish and maintain a relationship? How do you plan to do that? Do you have the time, the resources, the capacity, the intention, to open up a relationship?

4. How will you minimize negative impacts on everyone's emotional wellbeing (both the people being engaged and those doing the engaging)? How will you acknowledge that power dynamics and differentials exist?

Suggested Approaches

- Start with your existing relationships, such as WRAP-ED, Néḱem, the City's Multicultural Relations team, the IRO.

- Work with community groups already doing this work, and contacts established in Phase 1. Think of them as partners, and collaborators, and ask for their help to reach out further to community and faith leaders, to youth and families. Take an approach of identifying communities most impacted. Word of mouth.

- Partner with some of the larger organizations who can act as brokers in their respective communities, such as REACH, Bent Arrow, EMCN, MCHB, Africa Centre.

- Make some of the BSCF funding available for community-led engagement, research, strategizing, etc.. Make it available to community groups to conduct their own community engagement and strategizing sessions. Provide funding for them to cover logistics (venue rental, refreshments, child care, transportation, honoraria, facilitators' fees, etc.).

- Take a relational approach. Begin with people and organizations you already have relationships with. Ask for their advice on how to connect with others in their community or networks, or ask for a warm introduction. Often, for individuals who may have some unfamiliarity or mistrust of big systems, it is helpful to ask for help with brokering relationships. For example, working with the City of Edmonton's Multicultural Relations team or Indigenous Relations Office, or working with staff from one organization to further reach out to individuals they work with.

- Connect first with people who already have relationships in the community. For example, community support workers, community or faith leaders, informal leaders and community animators.

- Take a peer-approach to engaging individuals with lived experience. Work with those with lived experience who are interested and willing. Make sure they are compensated fairly for their time and supported.

- Be flexible and meet people where they are at. Some people might prefer to participate in 1-on-1 interviews for confidentiality, others might feel more comfortable in pairs, or having someone join the conversation who is a broker (who knows both the person being interviewed and the interviewee). Other people might prefer to participate with a group of people they feel comfortable with. It is important to think about traveling to meet people in the spaces they feel comfortable: community settings, community centres parks, public spaces, organizational offices, places of worship. And this might require meetings to take place outside of standard office hours (on evenings, weekends).

Supports to Have in Place

- Counseling and support services - for both participants and facilitators

- Support from an Indigenous elder, or a cultural or faith community leader (as appropriate)

- Honoraria provided

- Travel, childcare, and food should be provided to remove barriers to access.

Areas for Careful Consideration

- Connecting with youth under 18 comes with its own sensitivities. Work with youth-focused organizations or community leaders to connect with youth and families.

- Accountability - share results following interviews, give people an opportunity to edit, to access their own knowledge.

- Lived experience needs to be activated with careful consideration. Buck (2022)[1] outlines some of the considerations and cautions around engaging lived experience of criminalized individuals in research . "Despite powerful statements of inclusion and empowerment and promises of more effective and innovative service delivery, few scholars have examined what it feels like for criminalized individuals to activate their lived experiences in criminal justice work. Indeed, the emotional costs and ethical consequences of 'service user' involvement are too 'often unproblematized' (Brosnan 2019: 2). This is concerning because lived experience work is often conducted within spaces that are hostile, unequal and contested (Evans and Moore 2015; Lewis 2012) and where there are significant risks of tokenization, performative inclusion and exploitation (Yarbrough 2019). Although engaging lived experience within PVS practice holds tremendous potential, it can also reproduce problematic, exclusionary and punitive practices (Carlton and Scraton 2017). The success of efforts to center lived experiences in criminal justice, within and beyond the PVS, will require an equal commitment to safeguarding the emotional wellbeing of those asked to undertake this work" (Buck, 2022).

- Challenges

  - While many people want to see youth sharing lived experience, nobody really knows how to do this

  - https://blog.bham.ac.uk/educationalpsychology/2019/04/30/the-lived-experience-of-gang-membership/

  - Definitions of a gang are not clear.

  - In organizing gang-prevention initiatives in schools: "We can't call them gangs, because some youth might avoid it when they hear "gangs". But find a name that might attract youth. Working with school administration to see what role the school can play"

- https://www.governmentevents.co.uk/preventing-gang-involvement-through-sharing-lived-experience/

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[1] Gillian Buck and others, This is how it Feels: Activating Lived Experience in the Penal Voluntary Sector, The British Journal of Criminology, Volume 62, Issue 4, July 2022, Pages 822–839, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab102

Further Resources on Engaging People with Lived Experience

The Power of Lived Experience: Why involving people with direct experience with a problem leads to more powerful solutions. https://codeforamerica.org/news/the-power-of-lived-experience/

Gillian Buck and others, This is how it Feels: Activating Lived Experience in the Penal Voluntary Sector, The British Journal of Criminology, Volume 62, Issue 4, July 2022, Pages 822–839, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab102

Annapurna Ghosh and Danielle Gilmore. Community Science. "What Evaluators Mean When They Talk About 'Lived Experience'" https://communityscience.com/blog/what-evaluators-mean-when-they-talk-about-lived-experience/

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, 2021, Guidelines for Partnering with People with Lived and Living Experience of Substance Use and Their Families and Friends, https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2021-04/CCSA-Partnering-with-People-Lived-Living-Experience-Substance-Use-Guide-en.pdf

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division, 2014. Engage People with Lived Experience of Mental Health Conditions and Addictive Behaviours Workbook. https://cmha.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CMHA-engagement-report-2014.pdf

Feige, S., & Choubak, M. (2019). Best Practices for Engaging People with Lived Experience. Guelph, ON: Community Engaged Scholarship Institute.https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10214/17653/Feige_Choubak_PeerEngagementProject_LiteratureReview_2019.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Participation Guidelines for Individuals with Lived Experience and Family. https://www.samhsa.gov/grants/applying/guidelines-lived-experience

Primary Health Care Opioid Response Initiative, Engaging Individuals with Lived Experience: A Framework, 2018, Alberta.https://actt.albertadoctors.org/file/engaging-lived-experience-framework.pdf

Primary Health Care Opioid Response Initiative. A Roadmap for Engaging Individuals with Lived Experience. https://actt.albertadoctors.org/file/engaging-lived-experience-roadmap.pdf

Additional Questions for Consideration

Some questions to help clarify what lived experience means. These questions are taken from a healthcare context and have been adapted[2]:

- What specifically does the experience need to be about?
- Who is doing the engaging and why?
- What type of involvement are you asking of them? What are you inviting them to participate in, or contribute to? How will their contributions be used?
- Furthermore, is it the specific lived experience of Indigenous, Black, and other people of color experiencing discrimination by systems and institutions, who experience barriers, and ongoing trauma due to racism?

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[2] *Adapted from* https://communityscience.com/blog/what-evaluators-mean-when-they-talk-about-lived-experience/

- Would the lived experience include family members of people who have been involved in gang and gun violence? People who have been victims of it, or impacted by it?
- Would it include the lived experience of service providers?
- Does the experience need to have occurred in the past, or can it be an everyday experience?
- Could it be a one-time experience, or does it need to have occurred multiple times?
- Is it an experience that would have to occur for some time, and if so what length of time counts?
- Who stands to gain by inviting the participation of those with lived experience?
- Who is at risk of being harmed?
- What measures will we take to support participation of individuals with lived experience? And to balance out the power dynamics (project team is paid, participants are not paid)
  - Will it be feasible for them to get to the setting where the engagement activities are?
  - Will they be able to be off work or find childcare during that time?
  - Will they be comfortable and feel safe?
  - Will they risk any harm or being retraumatized—physical, psychological, or legal—given the location, space, or others involved? What safeguards have been put into practice to minimize these risks?
  - Are we using language that is accessible, will not cause harm?
  - Has the project team checked their own biases and mental models around this particular type of lived experience?
  - Have those who are invited to share their lived experience aware of potential discomfort and have they had a chance to set boundaries on the topics discussed?
  - Does the engagement activity consider potential translation and interpretation services for participants who are more comfortable expressing themselves in a different language?

Other Questions to Ask Ourselves:

- How much representation from people of lived experience is needed to be considered meaningful input?

- In terms of the rest of the project team accepting the validity of their expertise, what number of people would be considered sufficient?

- Given the variation in how people experience things and the range of perspectives among those with the lived experience, what factors for that particular lived experience need to be taken into consideration in order to determine the appropriate number to be able to be most representative of that variation?

- We need to acknowledge that there may be power imbalances between those with and without lived experiences. How will the engagement process build capacity

Some suggestions on thinking through "Lived Experience"

- Spend time determining why we are incorporating people with lived experience into this project. What is the goal, and what are the benefits to the strategy and to those people? Let's not let it become another checkbox if lived experience truly has value.

- Develop a working definition for lived experience for this project. Your definition may not be perfect but start somewhere and refine your definition using a continual learning process.

- Do your homework to better understand the person with lived experience on the topic you are exploring. This will help you create a supportive, appropriate, and effective environment for their participation.

- Plan for and conduct intentional recruitment and outreach to people with the lived experience that is relevant to the work you are doing. Often the same individuals are engaged over and over, and there is a need to prevent burn out or exploitation among those people.

- Establish agreements for engaging people with lived experience that define processes, practices, and language to be used.

- Evaluate what works well and what does not. Interview the individuals who have been serving as "people with lived experience" to discover what they identify as challenges, facilitators, and opportunities related to the issues you are evaluating and related to their engagement in the design and implementation of the evaluation.