

NOVEMBER 2008

Supporting the Call for a Youth Provincial Framework

A United Ways of Ontario Toolkit for Action

[2008-2009]

Supporting the Call for a Youth Provincial Framework

Introduction

Dear Community Partners:

As part of our year-long discussion on supporting a youth provincial framework, we are very proud to announce that the recently released Roots of Youth Violence Report, chaired by Mr McMurtry and Mr Curling includes a call for a Youth Provincial Framework. This important announcement allows us to continue our fantastic organizing activities to date, and suggest some new ones, including United Ways across the province convening Community Forums to organize support for the Framework and to ensure that the message – we need a framework for youth in this province now! - gets delivered to the government. This tool kit includes a guide for hosting a community Forum with the purpose of developing advocacy strategies to make noise about the call and ensure that our elected representatives are supporting it and lobbying for it in parliament. We know the time has come for the call, we know our communities are behind it, we now need to ensure that those voices are being heard in the halls of government. This tool kit offers some basic tools that we hope will be a useful template. Ultimately, the purpose of the kit is to support your community engagement processes in deciding the best way of ensuring that a Youth Provincial Framework is adopted.

This action kit includes:

- A facilitator's guide to help you plan and facilitate a community forum (including a template letter for your MPP), pp 3-8;
- Tips on working with the media, pp 10-11;
- Guidelines for meeting with your MPP, pp 12-14;
- Background information documents, including
 - Our key messages and Q&A, pp 16-19
 - Links to news articles, pp 20-24

At the UWO Conference, preceding webcast, community discussions, and teleconference we agreed that change is needed to better support youth in Ontario. With the Ontario Roots of Youth Violence Review, the most ever compelling and timely opportunity for a youth Framework to be adopted by the government has emerged. Through these forums, this is your community's opportunity to tell your elected representatives what the needs are of youth locally and how a Framework can support it. By convening our local communities, United Ways can be leading the call for the Framework province wide.

Should you have any questions or comments, please contact Michelle Dagnino, UWO Consultant, at mdagnino@youthventure.org or at 416-876-2552.

Facilitator's Guide

This facilitator's guide is designed to support a local community forum focused on supporting the recommendations from the Roots of Youth Violence report. We suggest that you use this facilitator's guide as a complement to the PowerPoint template entitled *Supporting a Provincial Framework: A Community Discussion*.

This facilitator's guide and accompanying background material are intended only to be resources for your work. We recommend that you modify this guide as appropriate, based on your understanding of relevant local issues and the strategies that work best in your particular community.

A. Objectives of the Community Forum

1. To convene local community stakeholders to identify key issues for a Framework;
2. To discuss the benefits of a Youth Provincial Framework with our elected representatives;
3. To determine next advocacy steps in lobbying for a Call for a Youth Provincial Framework.

B. Planning and Preparation

Prior to the event:

- Send an invite letter to your MPP and other elected officials (see the Appendix for a sample invitation on page 8).
- Decide whether you want to invite the media – see the Appendix for how to work with the media on pages 12-14).

We suggest the following format:

- Host a 3-hour meeting at a convenient and comfortable location.
- Open the Forum up to the community at large – the more people engaged, the more likely that it will be widely supported
- Have a note-taker to document the discussion
- Have flip charts or a white board, markers, and other supplies on hand

Invitations and Background material:

- Consider co-hosting the consultation with a local organization
- Potential participants: agencies, school boards, community recreation programs, youth groups, children's aid societies, local government, drop-ins or shelters, youth leaders, key donors, etc.
- An invitation template is included in this package
- Be familiar with the background documents on pages 16-22. These documents should also be distributed to stakeholders prior to the session.
 - link to the online Roots of Youth Violence Report (<http://www.rootsofyouthviolence.on.ca/english/reports.asp>)
 - FAQs and Key Messages from the Report
 - News articles from the Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star discussing some of the main issues raised by the report

C. Facilitating the Community Discussion:

The following is an overview of each of the sections in the PowerPoint template entitled Supporting a Youth Provincial Framework: A Community Discussion, that is included in this package. Please adapt as relevant and necessary.

1. **Welcome** (10 minutes)
The facilitator welcomes the group and explains that as United Way that has been working on youth issues for a number of years, we are interested in sharing our work and finding opportunities to collaborate towards better opportunities for youth in our community.

2. **Getting things Started: Introductions** (15 minutes)
The goal of this section is to have all participants gain an understanding about each other's work with youth. Facilitators can ask participants to introduce themselves. Facilitators should be aware that some participants may come from organizations that offer a wide range of programs and services for youth, while other organizations may be new to addressing complex youth issues, so it may be important to pay careful attention to time and opportunities to speak.

3. **Explaining the Roots of Youth Violence Report** (25 minutes)
The Report has a long list of recommendations outlining some of the ways we can address youth violence in the community. During this time, you summarize the main findings of the report, so that participants understand the core factors addressed in the report.
 - The report recommends measures to improve social conditions, address poverty and racism, generate employment opportunities, establish a comprehensive youth policy framework, and better coordinate the efforts of different government ministries and agencies. Question to ask in the next section: What issues are most important to your community?
 - It also recommends building strong communities through a "place-based" approach similar to the United Kingdom's, and the use of an Index of Relative Disadvantage to determine objectively which communities are most in need of extra assistance. Within those communities, whose boundaries would be confirmed in consultation with municipalities, the province would work with other partners to establish community hubs, create neighbourhood partnerships and increase the community's ability to work at solving its problems. Question to ask in the next section: Is your community working collaboratively to address the issues of youth?
 - To ensure an effective, coordinated and efficient approach to the many issues affecting violence involving youth, the Co-Chairs recommend a series of structural changes that would, if adopted, create a new Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion and Anti-Racism (or an equivalent central body), set up a Cabinet Office secretariat, and establish a Premier's advisory council. Question to ask in the next section: A call for a Provincial

Youth Framework needs to be supported from the grassroots up – how is your community going to support it?

4. **The impact of the recommendations in our local community** (40 minutes)

The goal of this section is to have participants discuss the strengths and challenges in implementing the recommendations, supporting a Provincial Framework and the impact it could have in your community.

To start building consensus, the facilitator asks participants to elaborate on the following discussion questions:

1. What recommendations are most relevant to your community?
2. How would a Provincial Youth Framework support the community?
3. What strategies are underway to address these recommendations? What other strategies are required?

5. **Break:** (15 min)

Before the break, the facilitator should thank participants and summarize some themes that have emerged so far. These themes may include:

- We all see youth as a key community priority
- We have created innovative responses to meet youth needs and to engage youth
- There are some disconnections that are apparent
- Funding for youth programs is mainly short-term and piecemeal
- Long-term planning for successful youth outcomes is difficult in the current system

6. **Moving Forward** (40 min)

The purpose of this section is to discuss the next steps involved in supporting a call for a youth provincial framework. The following discussion questions will focus on how to move forward with a unified voice.

Some suggested discussion questions:

1. What changes would we like to see for Ontario youth in the long term? How will a provincial youth framework help to effect those changes, and contribute to improved outcomes for youth?
2. What recommendations in the report are most relevant in our community?
3. What are three actions that we could take, individually and as a group, to further this idea? What other actions, initiatives, and project can we support in our community? Some suggested actions:
 - a. Write a letter to the Editor (see www.unitedwaytoronto.com for a sample letter)
 - b. Send a letter requesting follow-up actions from MPP
 - c. Organize a visit to your local MPP's office (see *Appendix D* for some tips on how to do this)

- d. Host a press conference with local champions (*see Appendix C for tips on working with the media*)
- e. Start a communications outreach sub-group to ensure that the issue stays in media and in the public eye
- f. Host a local outreach event, such as a Youth Day of Action!
- g. Set up information booths at other conferences or events taking place, or ask if you can have a small block of time to speak about the report and Framework for a few minutes at other youth-themed meetings & gatherings

7. **Wrapping up** (15 min)

Facilitator thanks participants for their participation in the discussion and summarizes the actions discussed.

8. **After the Discussion Session:**

- Send a follow-up letter to all participants thanking them for their participation and summarizing next steps. A template is included in this package.
- Please let us know how it went!

Appendices

APPENDIX A

Letter to MPP

Dear _____,

I am writing on behalf of _____ to request your attendance at a Forum on _____ to discuss the recent release of the Roots of Youth Violence Report (the “Report”). The Report highlights that youth violence and the systemic causes of youth violence are one of Ontario’s most pressing social concerns. While there have been many new initiatives set in place for youth over the past few years, there remain significant challenges and gaps in the youth-serving system. A reason for the persistent gaps is that the overall public policy response to youth issues have been developed in a piecemeal fashion, with various supports and services set up in isolation from each other. Therefore, the Report calls for the Government of Ontario to create an overarching policy framework that will unite the various actors working with youth. A provincial Youth Policy Framework can provide clarity around common objectives, leading to better alignment between government, ministries, and service providers. With a framework that envisions increased opportunity for youth in all communities and from all backgrounds, there will be less risk of duplication or gaps, and more ways to sustain essential youth programs over the long term. Additionally, a Youth Policy Framework can effectively address the broad developmental needs of youth, and ultimately create better outcomes for youth in Ontario.

We need your support at the Forum to Support a Call for the Youth Policy Framework because the report signifies an important commitment by the government to increasing the well-being of Ontario’s youth. The Report tells us what our youth need to be supported in their communities – it is now up to us to ensure that the Government recognizes and supports its long-standing commitments to youth development in this province.

We urge you to support a province wide Youth Policy Framework, as called for the in the Roots of Youth Violence report. All the communities across the province will reap the benefits; this initiative will make Ontario a stronger and healthier province. Thank you for taking the time to review our suggestions. I will follow up with your office in the near future to schedule a meeting at your earliest convenience to further discuss this issue.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX B

Thank-you Letter

Dear _____

Thank you for your participation in our recent Forum on the Call for a Youth Policy Outcome Framework. The session helped to identify advocacy tools that will strengthen our collaborative Call. We appreciate your time and expertise.

I am writing to follow-up on our agreed upon next steps, including:

- Writing to your MPP stating your support for the call, requesting a meeting and asking for their endorsement of it in the legislature
- Writing a letter to the editor
- Participating in a joint event on _____ to gather media attention.
- Downloading the postcard to the Premier on www.unitedwaytoronto.com and mailing it to the Premier's office

At the meeting we all recognized that in order to make progress in the area of youth development, a unified call is of the utmost importance. We look forward to continue working together to strengthen the youth sector in _____ and across Ontario.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX C

Working With the Media

Preplanning

- Draw up a list of community newspapers, cable and commercial television stations, and radio stations that serve your area.
- Make sure you include newspapers and radio stations that serve specific ethnic or cultural groups.
- Think about including college and university papers, as well as newsletters and bulletins published by churches, community groups, hospitals, etc.

Prior to the Event

- Three to five days prior to the event, fax an appropriate media advisory to the reporters on your list. The advisory should include the who, what, when, where, and why of the upcoming event. Be sure to include contact information in case reporters have questions.
- Call reporters the day after you send the media advisory. Explain that you are following up on the materials you sent. If they haven't seen the materials offer to fax them again.

Morning of the Event

- Send a news release to capture a reporter's interest. News releases should give full details of the event including quotes from spokespersons or participants. In addition to your story, the release should include an attention-grabbing headline and the name and phone number of the contact person. Limit your release to one side of one typed page, make it available at your event, and distribute it more broadly afterward, particularly to those reporters whom you contacted but did not attend.

During the Event

- Prepare a table with a sign-in list and news media kit. Sign-in sheets helps you identify which reporters attended your event. Media kits should provide the vital information a reporter will need to cover the event.
- Include items such as a forum agenda, statements from the speakers, copy of the press release, and background information on United Way and other event co-sponsors. Help reporters write a complete story by talking with each reporter in attendance. Offer reporters a quick interview before or after the program.

After the Event

- Follow up again. Contact reporters who covered the event later that day to see if they need additional information or quotes to complete their story. Call reporters who did not attend the event to offer additional information, including the news media kit, in case they intend to publish an article on the event.

Media Outreach Strategies

- Send letters to the editor of your local paper.
- Letter to the editor tips:
 - Focus on your local papers and include a local connection in your letter
 - Pick only one or two papers to which to send the letter
 - Most papers have a word limit on what they will print (generally 200 words). If you are brief you are more likely to be published.
 - Write an op-ed on supporting a Youth Provincial Framework. Coordinate the efforts of several good writers in your area and begin an op-ed campaign. Op-eds typically appear opposite a newspaper's editorial page (opposite editorial). Op-eds are generally 800 words or fewer and are a great forum for expressing your opinion on issues. Address the timeliness of the issue and the relevance to readers. Follow up with a brief phone call to ensure the editor received your piece. If your article is not used as an op-ed, it may be printed as a letter to the editor.
 - Talk to the airwaves. Organize a group to regularly listen to talk radio shows and share information about the issues. Talk radio shows offer an excellent opportunity to bring your message to the public. By calling and posing a question or making a point, you can promote your local efforts. Listen to talk radio shows in your community. Morning and afternoon drive-time shows are particularly good targets.

APPENDIX D

Meeting with Elected Officials

Connecting with your elected officials about the Report and its recommendations in a face-to-face meeting is a great way to develop a relationship with them and work to influence the stands they take on issues important to you. Below are some helpful tips for before, during, and after a visit.

Requesting the visit

- Make your request in writing and follow up with a call to the appointment secretary or scheduler. Make sure the scheduler knows that you are a constituent. Suggest specific times and dates for your meeting.
- Let the person know what issue you wish to discuss.

Preparing for the visit

- Decide who will attend the meeting. It can be a group of supporters, you individually, or a coalition of people who represent different groups that have an interest in the issue.
- Gather information. Learn about your MPP's position on the recommendations outlined in the report. Become familiar with the differing views and arguments on the issues to help you answer questions.
- Agree on three main talking points. Keep your message simple and to-the-point. See the attached info sheets for help in crafting your message.
- Plan your meeting. People can get nervous in a meeting, and time is limited. Be sure that you lay out the agenda for the meeting beforehand, including who will start the conversation and who will make key points.
- Decide what you want to achieve. What is it you want your elected official to do? Asking your MPP to do something specific will give you a benchmark for success! Some suggestions:
 - Ask your MPP to raise a question in the House: "Does the Premier support a Youth Provincial Framework as called for in the Roots of Youth Violence Report"
 - Ask your MPP to publicly state their support for the Framework, through a press release or conference.
 - Ask your MPP to send a letter to the Premier outlining their support for the Framework.

- Prepare materials to leave with the elected official or staff such as a letter or fact sheet summarizing your concerns are good examples. See the info sheets in this package as examples, particularly, the key messages at pp. 16 -17.

During the visit

- Make introductions and be clear who is a constituent in the meeting. Parliamentarians are most responsive to the people who can keep them in office – their constituents – so always attempt to have some constituent representation in any meeting.
- Provide brief, clear statements about the problem and your solution.
- Personalize your comments and provide local context. Make a strong connection between the issue and the local community that the MPP represents. Use of personal stories and local examples help illustrate why your issue is important.
- Support your case with facts. Don't overwhelm with numbers, charts and data, but do use them judiciously to make your point and legitimize your argument.
- Stick to your talking points! Stay on topic, and back it up with no more than five pages of materials you can leave with your elected official
- Listen carefully to your MPP's responses. What is the person saying about the issue? What is his or her position? What questions or concerns do they have that might be answered? Pay attention to the direct and indirect statements of support or opposition.
- Ask for their support. If you don't directly ask your MPP if they support your position, you may never actually find out what they think and what they intend to do. **THE ASK MUST BE CLEAR.** For example, "Can we count on you to support a call for a Provincial Framework" After you ask, pause. Let them answer and clarify if their response is not yet clear. Once you get an answer, you will know if your MPP supports you, opposes you, or is undecided.
If they support you, thank them, and thank them again. Be a resource to them. If they need additional information or help in any way, offer to make that available. If they oppose you, stay cordial and friendly. Even if you disagree on this issue, you maybe in agreement on another issue. Keep the door open to working together in the future. If they are undecided, ask if there is additional information they need on this issue and get it to them in a timely manner. Also think about whose voice it is important for them to hear from on the issue and try to mobilize it on your behalf.

After the visit

- Right after the meeting compare notes with everyone in your group to confirm what the elected official committed to do.
- Each person who took part in the meeting should promptly send a personal thank you letter to your elected official. Remind them of anything they may have agreed to do.
- Follow up in a timely fashion with any requested materials and information.

Background Materials

APPENDIX 1

Roots of Youth Violence Review Key Messages

Overview:

The complexity of the issues identified in the Report is our biggest challenge. The more controversial issues identified as root causes will draw the most attention.

The following key messages acknowledge the controversial aspects of the report, but frame them in the context of a lack of coordination. **Lack of coordination** is an underlying theme of the Report, and dealing with it forms one of the major recommendations.

The strategy is to attempt to make an explicit connection between **lack of coordination** and the issues of racism, poverty and gender, with the goal of having coordination become a part of the conversation regarding the Report.

Key Messages:

- The Report is a defining moment in the province's history to address and begin to solve (in a systemic way) the issue of youth violence.
- It identifies a number of root causes behind youth violence in our communities, including poverty, gender and racism.
- Throughout the Report a serious **lack of coordination** in response to these issues underpins the problem of youth violence.
- This Report shows that the very youth most affected by issues like poverty, racism, gender discrimination, and social exclusion, are the ones most likely to fall through the cracks left by a **lack of coordination** when it comes to youth outcomes.
- The Report proves that the most practical, common sense starting place is for the Province to take the lead in developing a coordinated framework for youth.
- Although there are no quick fixes, and given the current fiscal climate, focussing on better coordination and efficiency is a strategy that won't cost the Province a lot of money.
- Many other jurisdictions have already come to the conclusion that it makes sense to coordinate strategies aimed at improving the lives of young people.
- When trying to improve conditions for youth, it only makes sense to identify common goals and outcomes, and agree on how to measure progress.
- YPAC has come together because we believe creating a coordinated framework is a critical way for the government to effectively address the issue of youth violence and look forward to working with them in creating it.

- This is something the Province can get started right away. And I know there is wide support in our sector for getting to work now.

Supporting Messages:

Each spokesperson should draw upon their own knowledge and experience in the youth-service sector to highlight messages supporting our call for a coordinated framework.

Examples of supporting messages:

On what the Report is telling us:

- It is very clearly telling us we need coordinated, comprehensive, and collaborative strategies for youth.
- To grow into successful adults, young people need to be part of a healthy and supportive community (Why we need to focus on building community, family, and individual assets).
- Young people need significant adults in their lives who will be unconditionally supportive, to help foster a sense of belonging and demonstrate the importance of relationships.
- All young people need opportunities — chances to develop their personal talents and build their own confidence and resilience through the choices they make while growing up.
- There are often different approaches and programs needed for male and female youth as a response to issues of violence in our community

On Coordination

- Better coordination among various systems (justice, education, mental health, e.g.) would allow efforts to be aligned across sectors and reinforce and build consistent approaches to programs, services, and even underlying philosophies applied to different systems dealing with youth.
- E.g., in mental health there are currently examples where a lack of coordination leads to inconsistency and gaps when serving the needs of youth. Young people are assessed and dealt with differently for the same conditions. What is assessed as “anti-social behaviour” in the justice sector is identified as “exceptionalities” in the education system and “disorders” in community health. Similar conditions, different assessments and different underlying assumptions regarding how to approach the issues.

Roots of Youth Violence Review Policy Framework Questions and Answers – FINAL

Q1. What is a youth policy framework?

A1. A youth policy framework is a plan that encourages better coordination of programs, services and investments aimed at improving the lives of young people.

The youth policy framework we're talking about will establish goals and objectives for addressing the needs of youth, guide government decision-making, and outline how we can get the best results as we work toward those goals.

Q2. What is the problem with our current way of doing things?

A2. As the Roots of Youth Violence Review Panel has said, our current system is leaving too many young people behind. Right now we have a patchwork of programs and services for youth, each responding to specific needs without reference to broader outcomes. Youth policy has been developed in a piecemeal fashion, with a variety of supports and services created in isolation. Youth strategies exist in silos, and rarely address the root causes of issues and broad needs of young people.

As a result, there are too many gaps that vulnerable youth can fall through. We need a strategy that promotes better coordination if we want to really help young people and start making lasting changes in their lives.

Q3. What difference will a youth policy framework make?

A3. A youth policy framework will help to ensure that every young person in Ontario will have opportunities for growth and development, have a supportive community in which to belong, and have access to help when they need it.

A framework will help do this by providing common objectives, leading to a more efficient alignment between policy, funding, program development and service delivery. There will be less duplication, fewer gaps, and more ways to sustain essential youth programs over the long-term.

Q4. What exactly are you asking the government to do?

A4. We're asking the Province of Ontario to take the lead in developing an integrating and coordinating strategy for meeting the basic human and developmental needs of young people. This can be accomplished by working with a broad group of stakeholders to establish a shared vision for youth outcomes, and by building on existing programs and initiatives that have already been proven to work. An example of the type of youth outcome we would be working toward is that '*All youth are provided support for entering the job market*'.

Q5. What would a youth policy framework look like?

A5. A youth policy framework starts with a vision of the outcomes that we would like for our youth. Then it maps out the steps towards achieving this vision. A youth policy framework takes into consideration factors necessary for positive youth development and sets guidelines for policy and program decision-making. This includes strategies that coordinate government programs and investments, ensure services are based on proven best practices, determine priorities for action, set measurable goals, create inter-governmental linkages, and involve broad community expertise.

This approach is not new. As referenced in the Roots of Youth Violence report, the Ontario Early Years and Best Start strategies formed a comprehensive, evidence-based system of services for families with young children that promote learning and healthy development. This could be done across all programs and service domains, including health, education, well-being, justice, and employment.

Q6. Why should the government take action?

A6. We're only asking this government to do what many others around the world have already done. The Roots of Youth Violence Review report proves that the most practical, common sense place to start tackling youth violence is for the Province to take the lead in developing a coordinated strategy for youth.

Developing a policy framework is an opportunity for the government to move quickly toward addressing the recommendations in the report. It's also an opportunity for the government to augment its own poverty reduction strategy.

There are no quick fixes, but in this current fiscal environment, focusing on improving coordination and increasing efficiency is a strategy that won't cost a lot of money. More importantly, it's a strategy that we believe will work.

Ontario at 'crossroads,' report on youth violence warns

Last Updated: Friday, November 14, 2008 | 3:49 PM ET

[CBC News](http://www.cbc.ca/canada/toronto/story/2008/11/14/mcmurtry-curling.html?ref=rss)

<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/toronto/story/2008/11/14/mcmurtry-curling.html?ref=rss>

A report released Friday on youth violence in Ontario says too many young people are being caught up in violence fuelled by poverty and racism.

The Roots of Youth Violence report, authored by former cabinet minister Alvin Curling and former Ontario chief justice Roy McMurtry, was ordered by Premier Dalton McGuinty following the May 2007 shooting death of Jordan Manners.

Manners, 15, was shot and killed inside C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute.

"We strongly believe Ontario is at a crossroads in dealing with the roots of violence involving youth," said McMurtry. "Our report presents the government with a comprehensive framework to address the serious trends we have identified and that will have serious consequences if allowed to continue unchecked."

The Curling-McMurtry report makes 30 recommendations — key among them is a call for increased mental health care for Ontario children, as well as a controversial suggestion to gather race-based statistics.

Although the report points to "deeply troubling trends" when it comes to youth violence in Ontario, it also attempts to provide some solutions.

One of the primary suggestions is for \$200 million to provide improved mental health care for students, and social workers and counsellors in communities where potentially troubled youth can access them.

Race-based statistics needed: McMurtry

The report also calls for the collection of race-based statistics in areas like education and health.

McMurtry told a news conference at Queen's Park that without those statistics there is no way to fix the problems.

"The community now wants these statistics, and I've spoken with [Toronto police] Chief Bill Blair and he is not opposed to the idea," said McMurtry.

But Blair's boss, Mayor David Miller, who attended the news conference, does not support the idea.

The race-based statistics, called "floor targets" in the report, are necessary so that "racial and other relevant differences [may] be tracked as the province measures progress towards outcome goals," the authors said in a prepared statement.

"The province should commit to measuring and publishing progress towards defined outcome goals as a central part of its approach to the roots agenda. To the greatest extent possible, the outcome goals should include minimum standards of achievement, a level below which no institution or community should fall," said the report.

The statistics could be used to track education and health trends.

The report also took aim at so-called zero tolerance in schools. Curling said too many students are being driven away for minor infractions.

"Many young people are being criminalized. They have a record at a very young age — that itself has to be looked at and how we can deal with that," he said.

Toronto District School Board chair John Campbell says maintaining discipline and safety is not easy.

"I can't say that is always the case, or it's a frequent occurrence, but principals are in a position where they have to keep their schools safe," he said.

Progressive Conservative critic Julia Munro said the report's main goal seems to have been to gather information, and it includes no quick fixes.

Munro said the Ministry of Children and Youth Services was created to help deal with issues brought up in the report, which leaves her wondering why it hasn't been addressing them.

Roots of violence grow in toxic soil of social exclusion



FRANK GUNN/CP FILE PHOTO

C.W. Jefferys Secondary School is where 15-year-old Jordon Manners was shot and killed last year.

Only a sustained commitment led by Queen's Park can build a safe and just society in Ontario

November 15, 2008

**ROY MCMURTRY
ALVIN CURLING**

"Ontario is at a crossroads. While it is a safe place for most, our review identified deeply troubling trends in the nature of serious violent crime involving youth in Ontario and the impacts it is having on many communities. Those trends suggest that, unless the roots of this violence are identified and addressed in a co-ordinated, collaborative and sustained way, violence will get worse. More people will be killed, communities will become increasingly isolated and disadvantaged, an ever-accelerating downward cycle will ensue for far too many, and our social fabric as a province could be seriously damaged."

This is how we open our five-volume report to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty on the roots of violence involving youth. The words come from our hearts, which remain very deeply troubled by what we found during our review. They also come from our heads, which tell us that those roots are now so extensive, interconnected and entrenched that

only a sustained and aligned commitment, led by the provincial government, can maintain Ontario on a relatively safe and healthy path from the crossroads we identified.

These roots took years to grow. They are not the responsibility of any one political party or government. Indeed, our report acknowledges the positive steps that the present government has been taking, notably those to advance early childhood initiatives, put poverty reduction high on its agenda and improve the education system. But serious issues remain to be addressed.

Across Ontario we found a sad similarity in what too many youth must face on a daily basis. There is far too much poverty in Ontario, and far too few services and supports for those struggling to get ahead.

The housing market, and some planning practices, have driven the most disadvantaged to live in high concentrations of poverty, fundamentally changing the greater economic integration of earlier days.

Racism is worse than it was a generation ago, while there are fewer resources and structures to counter this great evil than existed in years past.

We also found widespread youth mental health problems going unaddressed, a school system that fails to connect with far too many youth, communities that seem designed for crime, a lack of mentors for youth and supports for their families, a failure to listen to youth, engage them and respect their varied backgrounds and perspectives, the absence of places for youth to gather or play, curtailed economic opportunities for youth, and numerous other manifestations of a social context that is broken for far too many.

Particularly troubling is the compounding of these factors in areas where disadvantaged groups are concentrated. These are areas many people leave when they get a job, where the teachers reside far away and, therefore, often cannot understand the circumstances of their students, where public services are often stretched and inaccessible, and where core facilities such as parks and recreation centres are lacking, or not available because of the fee structure or because both youth and their parents fear violence.

Tragically, these fears are well-established in the neighbourhoods we visited. We heard about gun violence, violence around drugs and drug dealing, robberies on the street, swarmings, verbal abuse, intimidation, threats, gangs and claims of turf, attacks with knives, fights at school, violence in sports, domestic abuse, sexual assaults, dating violence and violence that flows from systemic issues such as racism, inequality and poverty.

Predictably, fear in neighbourhoods is on the rise, a code of silence is increasingly taking hold, communities and youth are being stereotyped and becoming desensitized

to violence, which is becoming a more acceptable way of dealing with conflict, and gangs are proliferating.

It is not just the bullets that kill that devastate these communities, as they do all of us. Those that miss their targets are equally terrifying, as are the guns that are not fired. The constant threat of serious violence isolates parents from their neighbours, stifles community-building, keeps youth away from healthy activities and often leads them to the gangs for self-defence or safe passage.

The human cost of this is staggering and heartbreaking. Youth are coming to believe that their hopes should be as limited as their horizons, that they are not expected to succeed, and that high barriers lie between them and any chance of belonging to the prosperous future we all want for this province. The deepening alienation and the lack of hope or sense of belonging that result damage the lives and prospects of many youth, and powerfully increase the risk that increasing numbers of them will be involved in extreme and unpredictable violence.

But this distressing downward cycle can be stopped. Our report shows the way forward. A determined, aligned and focused provincial government, structured to work effectively and invest strategically across the existing silos, and to collaborate with local governments, community agencies, youth and strengthened neighbourhoods, can design, implement and sustain initiatives that translate despair into optimism, convert alienation into belonging, and transform social exclusion into meaningful and ongoing engagement and opportunities.

The foundations for this undertaking exist already in the many people working with compassion and deep wisdom to counter the grim reality that their communities face. They are also found in the work of the United Way, and other agencies, on poverty and community-building. The initiatives of cities like Toronto are focusing real resources and continuing commitment in areas of concentrated disadvantage. Most importantly, the fact the premier invited this fundamental analysis provides real hope for significant and sustained change.

Roy McMurtry is a former chief justice of Ontario and former Conservative attorney-general; Alvin Curling is a former Liberal cabinet minister and speaker of the Ontario Legislature.