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# **If You Want to Change Violence in the 'Hood, You Have to Change the 'Hood: Violence and Street Gangs in Winnipeg's Inner-City**

**By Elizabeth Comack, Lawrence Deane,  
Larry Morrissette, and Jim Silver**

**A Report Presented to Honourable Dave Chomiak,  
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## The Report in Brief

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There is growing concern about the level of violence in Winnipeg’s North End. The media regularly feature headline reports about gun violence, and street gang activity has become a focus of attention in the effort to “get tough on crime.”

Against this backdrop, the authors met with six members of a North End street gang, who wanted to convey their experiences of living in the North End, their thoughts on the recent events that have occurred there, and their insights into what it will take to make meaningful change.

Too often the voices of such men are not heard. Yet they have an intimate knowledge of, and are an integral part of, these pressing problems. If meaningful change is to occur their voices need to be made part of the public discussion.

These men had important things to say about ‘getting tough on crime.’ They agree that if they commit crimes, they have to do the time. But they are adamant that this strategy will *not* solve the problem of violence in the North End and broader inner city.

We discussed several other options. Policing in the North End has recently been intensified to the point where “it’s like the military in the North End now” and anyone who “fits the description” is being targeted. This strategy, they explained, is likely to aggravate the problem, not solve it. Similarly, they offered reasons why other quick-fix solutions—a gun amnesty, a truce or ceasefire agreed to by street gangs, the Winnipeg Auto Theft

Suppression Strategy applied to street gangs—will not work.

The central viewpoint, expressed repeatedly over our two days of meetings, is that street gangs and gun violence are a product of the poverty and systemic racism of the North End, and all their consequences—addictions, violence, family disintegration, neglect, abuse. These men grew up in the midst of these conditions, and were exposed to the associated gang life from a very early age. As one told us, “When you’re young, and see that, it’s all normal.” This is the soil in which street gangs and gun violence have grown. What emerged most strongly during our meeting was that these men do not want youngsters in the North End—“the next me”—to go through what they have gone through.

Meaningful change will therefore require long term solutions aimed at addressing the poverty and systemic racism that are the root causes of street gangs and violence. Building pride and self-esteem through the provision of the right kinds of jobs and investing in more community recreation and drop-in centres for kids and families in the North End would be important steps in that direction. We know that this strategy will work because there are successful, small-scale examples—such as OPK and BUILD—now operating in Winnipeg’s North End.

If we want to change the violence in the ‘hood, we would do well to heed the wise advice of these hard-headed men who know the ‘hood all too well. We have to change the ‘hood.

# **If You Want to Change Violence in the ‘Hood, You Have to Change the ‘Hood: Violence and Street Gangs in Winnipeg’s Inner-City**

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Concerns about the level of violence in Winnipeg’s North End have intensified in recent months. Spurred on by media reports of lethal shootings, there is a growing sense that the problem is intensifying—and that meaningful solutions need to be found. To this point, the favoured strategies have reflected a ‘get tough on crime’ approach that involves a “swift crackdown on violent street gangs” (*Winnipeg Free Press*, August 10, 2009) through an increased police presence in the North End and intensive monitoring and longer prison sentences for street gang members.

The four co-authors of this report are deeply concerned about the level of violence and related deaths in Winnipeg’s inner city. Three of us are university academics with decades of experience researching and writing about these issues; the fourth has been actively involved for decades in making change in the inner city. Collectively, our experience tells us that if meaningful change is to occur in the North End, it cannot be imposed from outside the community. While support from outside the community is crucial, change must originate from within, based upon the knowledge and insights of those who live in that community.

It was in this spirit that we met with six members of a North End street gang over two days in early August. We had been working on developing a research project that involved gaining a better understanding of what life is like for young

Aboriginal men who live in Winnipeg’s inner city. So when these men approached us, saying that they wanted to convey their experiences of living in the North End, their thoughts on the recent events that have occurred there, and their insights into what it will take to make meaningful change, we took advantage of this opportunity. All six are Aboriginal men who have served time in jail or penitentiary as adults. Five of the six served juvenile time and some have served long sentences. All six have spent their entire adult lives and much of their ten years in a street gang.

Too often the voices of men such as these have not been heard. Yet, these are some of the people who have “lived it” and therefore possess intimate knowledge of what is going on. So it follows that if meaningful change is to occur, their voices need to be made part of the discussion.

We arranged to meet in a hotel room in a small rural Manitoba town, as the men said they were less likely to be harassed in that setting. We met for approximately eight hours in total. After the meeting we prepared a draft of this report, which was circulated to the street gang members. We then met a second time at a North End Winnipeg location to review the document to confirm that it was an accurate representation of what they told us. In this way, constructing this report has been very much a collective undertaking.

We take the view, reinforced by the two days of meetings, that when serious crimes are committed, the offenders should be incarcerated. In this sense we are not ‘soft on crime’—and neither are the six street gang members. They take it as a given that if they are caught doing a crime, they will do the time. But because the issues are far more complex, devising solutions requires changing how we have typically approached the problem of violence in Winnipeg’s inner city.

### **The ‘Get Tough on Crime’ Approach**

The street gang members had important things to say about ‘getting tough on crime.’ First of all, in one sense they agree with this approach. They accept that they are gang members, and that going to jail or prison is a consequence of that line of work. As one of them said, “I’m a gang member. I do what I do. I am what I am. There has to be laws for people like me.” They have all felt the full force of the law, having served time in prison, in some cases for long periods. If they continue to commit crimes and are apprehended, they agree that they should suffer the consequences. However, the men also told us that while they accept imprisonment as the consequence of their actions, it will not work as a solution to violence in the inner city.

The men have complex views about serving time. To begin with, none of them like it. They said things such as: “No one likes being locked up” and “it sucks in jail” but you “gotta tough it out.” Nevertheless, it is also the case that doing time is a means of recognition, a badge of achievement in street gang circles. Besides, “when we go to jail we go there with our bro’s,” as they are incarcerated

alongside their friends. It is also the case that prison “teaches you street smarts” and “turns you into a better criminal.” As one of the men said, “CSC [Corrections Services of Canada] taught me everything I needed to learn [about doing crimes] in prison.”

Prison makes tough people tougher. One man, who was locked up for the entirety of his teen years, told us that he “grew up in prison.” To survive that experience, he had to fight and be prepared to use violence—which he did. “That’s the way you survive in prison” because prison is a violent environment. As one of the men said, describing the irony of imprisonment: “They put us in a society [prison] where violence is prevalent and tell us not to be violent.”

*“They put us in a society [prison] where violence is prevalent and tell us not to be violent.”*

Prison may serve a certain deterrent value, particularly for older gang members. As they age, serving time becomes more difficult. However, by the time they are in their 30s or 40s, they are locked into the street gang lifestyle and they do not know how to do anything else. More importantly, no other doors are open to them. They have to “put food in the fridge,” and they have no other means of doing so. The result is that they may no longer be so prepared to “tough it out” in prison, but they continue with illegal activities because that is all they know and that is all that is open to them.

The net result is that prison is not the answer to violence in the inner city. We should continue to send violent offenders to prison. But we shouldn’t fool ourselves into thinking that the problems in the North End will be solved by this means.

## **Are There Other Short-Term Solutions?**

We had lengthy conversations about other strategies, and their likely effectiveness in deterring crime and violence in the short term. For example, in response to the perceived increase in levels of violence the Winnipeg Police Service has flooded the North End with officers and cruiser cars. As a consequence, the men said the police have been “in their face,” as they are being regularly stopped and asked to account for themselves. Sometimes this practice occurs when children are present, and it is so frequent that one man was stopped three times in one hour as he made his way around the North End. “It’s like the military in the North End now,” another said. “It’s all-out war on us.” They likened the atmosphere now to what they understand to have been the case in big American cities, like Los Angeles, fifteen years ago. Police are swarming the North End. SWAT teams are present at funerals. “It’s like we’re under siege.”

*“All you’re gonna do is slow us down a little bit. And the next day someone else gets out [of prison] and the same shit starts again.”*

Everyone who “fits the description”—especially those who are young, male, and Aboriginal—is being targeted. We know from the men’s accounts of this process, and from other studies done in Winnipeg, that this police harassment is often aggressive, sometimes violent, and sometimes accompanied by racist epithets. The view of the street gang members is that flooding the North End with enlarged teams of police officers will not deter them from what they are doing. It will, rather, anger many residents of the North End who are not involved with illegal or violent activi-

ties but who are targeted anyway because they “fit the description.”

From previous studies done in Winnipeg’s inner city we know that most inner-city residents do want a greater police presence in their neighbourhoods. But what they want is community policing where police are a positive presence and get to know the neighbourhoods and the children. Aboriginal people in particular do not want the aggressive style of policing involved in flooding the North End with cops and harassing people, because too often those harassed are guilty of nothing at all.

The result of this intensified policing strategy, the street gang members told us, will be an angry response from the community and more disrespect for the police, which will generate yet more suppression and harassment, leading to a vicious spiral that is as likely to promote violence as to quell it. As for the street gang members themselves: “All you’re gonna do is slow us down a little bit. And the next day someone else gets out [of prison] and the same shit starts again.”

We also asked whether a gun amnesty would make a difference in reducing the number of weapons available on the street. If anyone could turn in a gun to the police with no questions asked, would that reduce the violence? For example, a small machine gun was found recently in a back lane in the North End near where one of the four co-authors works. If there was an amnesty implemented would these weapons get turned in by those who find them?

There was general agreement among the men that this strategy would produce minimal benefits. A parent who finds a gun in a son’s drawer might

turn it in. But a kid who finds a gun in the alley would be more likely to sell it to a gang member, “because that’s how the North End is.”

Could a truce, a ceasefire, be negotiated among the street gangs that would lead to reduced gun violence? The answer to this was unequivocal: “Not remotely, not for a minute, not for a second!” The leaders of the street gangs all know each other, and they do talk on occasion. As one of the men explained, “We’ve all gone to prison together since we were little kids.” But there is no trust among the gangs. “There’s too much bad blood.... It just wouldn’t happen.” More importantly, there are now too many gangs, too many cliques and factions. Even if a truce was agreed to by leaders of the main street gangs, smaller factions would not feel bound and would soon break the agreement.

Will the Winnipeg Auto Theft Suppression Strategy (WATSS)—which involves intensive monitoring of the highest risk auto thieves—work if applied to the street gang problem? The men saw this strategy as a band-aid solution. Worse, it is a band-aid created for a different problem. As one of the six said to us, “You can’t take this band-aid off and put it on that wound.” In fact, this is just another version of swarming the North End with police officers and being in people’s faces, and “there is not enough jail space” to make that work. It is not getting to the root of the problem

It became evident to us that there is no *short-term* solution to the problem of violence in the North End. The public want an immediate solution. They want a halt to the violence, as we all do. But hoping for an immediate solution is unrealistic. As one of the gang members

said: “There ain’t no ‘cure.’ You can’t take an aspirin for the North End and it’ll be over in half an hour.” That astute observation leads directly to one of our main contentions: there is no aspirin or “magic solution.” There is a solution, but it is a long-term one that involves getting at the deeper roots of the problem of street gang violence.

### **The Roots of the Problem of Street Gang Violence**

Street gangs are the product of the poverty and systemic racism that have long been present in the North End. This point became obvious from the childhood experiences related to us by the men. These men grew up in circumstances such that experiences of neglect, abuse, violence, drugs, crime—and the gang life—were “normal” to them, a part of their day-to-day experience of life in Winnipeg’s North End. As we were told several times, “You don’t know what it’s like to live there. To us it’s a normal, everyday event.”

One of the six described being eight years old and having to be home each night by shortly after 2 AM—because that’s when the bars closed and his parents returned home. But he only had to stay a short while and then he could slip out again to be with his friends. He started drinking on a regular basis when he was only nine years old.

Another described watching his father cut up illegal drugs on the kitchen table and recalled conversations at home when he was less than ten years old about the Main Street Rattlers, Winnipeg’s first street gang. “When you’re young, and see that, it’s all normal.”

Hunger was also normal. One described breaking into a storage building with a group of kids and stealing potato chips when there was no food at home. They ate chips all weekend to quell their hunger.

Some might ask: “Where were the parents? Doesn’t the fault lie with the parents?” Obviously, these are cases of bad parenting. But when we posed that issue to the street gang members their reply was typically hard-headed: there is no use in simply saying parents should do better, in saying it’s their fault. There is no use in bemoaning “these fantasy issues of ‘it shouldn’t be that way.’ It is!” Their point is that for them, that is the way it was. That was their reality, their world.

*“Go to the corner of [two North End streets] at 1 AM or 2 AM tonight. You will see eight and ten year olds running around unsupervised.... That’s the next me,” he said. “That’s the next brother.”*

That world has not changed. One of the men told us, “Go to the corner of [two North End streets] at 1 AM or 2 AM tonight. You will see eight and ten year olds running around unsupervised.... That’s the next me,” he said. “That’s the next brother. The one they deem to be unrehabilitatable.” The gang problem is being reproduced by the social conditions that prevail in the North End. It is those conditions that create the street gangs and the gangsters. The problems continue to be reproduced because the machine that produces them—the North End and broader inner city with all its poverty and related conditions—remains hard at work, churning out its inevitable products.

Yet the media talk every day about the

violence, and say next to nothing about the poverty and related problems that are producing the violence. The media, these men told us, simply don’t understand what it is like to live in the North End, and how conditions in the North End produce street gangs and violence. The media talk constantly and often in a sensationalized way about the violence, that is, the symptoms, and rarely, if ever, do they seriously address the causes. This was a major part of the message that these men conveyed to us.

One of the street gang members told a story about recently being in a North End store to buy something. Two small Aboriginal children were there, dirty and poorly dressed. They were trying to scrape together enough money between them to share a sandwich. He gave them \$20. Why? “Because that was me. I was that dirty Indian kid.... I didn’t have nothin’. I had to steal it.” Unfortunately, the kids then say to each other: “Did you see that guy’s wad of cash?” The result is that for kids growing up in poverty, the street gang life is glamourized. “I didn’t mean to [produce this result],” he said, but the kids are not stupid, and “they know this is the way.” The gangster life seems attractive to them, relative to the poverty and related problems they experience at home and in their community.

A younger gang member said his family was hardly ever around when he was growing up. He got in trouble and landed in jail. He joined the gang there because they showed him respect and supported him. When he got out of jail he had nothing, but “They helped me.”

Yet another grew up in foster homes in the North End all his life. He was in the midst of house parties with street gang members when he was six years old. It



made him “wanna be like them.” Most talked about cousins with whom they hung out and who got involved in the gang life. They joined in because it was “normal.” It was all around them.

The point is that they and their street gang are a product of the deep and persistent poverty and racism of the North End, and all of its consequences—addictions, violence, family disintegration, neglect, and abuse.

So if we ask, are street gangs the problem? The first part of the answer is: no, street gangs are the natural and inevitable *consequence* of the problem. The problem is the deep poverty and related circumstances in which these men and others like them grew up, and which were “normal” to them. And since this problem persists, street gangs and gangsters and the violence associated with their lifestyle will continue to be produced.

*We can put street gang members in jail—and we should when they commit serious offences—but doing so will solve nothing.* The problem is reproducing itself out of the conditions in the North End and broader inner city.

As one of the six pointed out to us, and as is obvious to anyone, there are no street gangs in Charleswood or Fort Garry. There are street gangs in the inner city and North End. Why? Because that is where the poverty and all its byproducts are concentrated, and these are the breeding grounds, the cause, of the street gangs and their violence.

We believe that what one of the gang members said more than once is a profound truth: “If you want to change violence in the ‘hood you have to change the ‘hood.” You have to deal with the root cause.

## **Street Gangs Make the Problems Worse**

Street gangs, while not the root cause, certainly make the problems in the North End worse.

The six street gang members were adamant in saying that despite recent media hype, violence in the North End is nothing new. Violence has been in the North End as long as they’ve been around. “They say that’s the most violent prone area because of gangs. Well, it’s not because of gangs.... There was always gangs. But now it’s just being glorified and glamourized with more publicity. And it’s just blown it all up. That’s why you’ve now got, like, 50 f’in gangs in the city.” When some of them were younger, people would be stabbed with knives.

*“They say that’s the most violent prone area because of gangs. Well, it’s not because of gangs.... There was always gangs.”*

Now they use guns, which appear to be in abundant supply: “Buying a gun these days is almost easier than buying a gram.” The street gang members pointed out that they are not the ones with the access to the planes and other resources who bring guns and drugs into their neighbourhood, but because of the guns, “we’re more advanced gangsters now, we’re more advanced criminals.” So the violence that has always been there is magnified by the presence of guns.

The violence is also magnified by the code of the streets, the code of survival in the business these street gang members are engaged in. And they talk about their work in much the same way as more conventional businessmen do, saying that it’s a “dog eat dog,” rough and com-

petitive business that's "all about money." It is also a business in which "You can't let anyone take advantage of you. You can't be seen to be weak." This situation is not new; it has been the case for at least the past 20 years. "If something is done to us, or to one of our gang, we have to retaliate." Otherwise, "they make us all look weak ... and that comes down to money... If we look weak we can't make money.... That's what it's 100 percent all about." Another said: "We just do what we gotta do." The struggle over illegal drug money necessitates retaliation—and violence. The violence has always been a part of the street gang/illegal drugs equation.

### **These Guys Aren't Getting Rich**

Contrary to the glamourization of gang life, these street gang members are not rich. They have little to show for the lifestyle they lead, at least in the terms valued by mainstream society. They carry a wad of cash in their pockets, and can peel off a \$20 bill for a North End kid who *thinks* they're rich and wants to emulate them. And they spend freely and engage in a fair amount of conspicuous consumption. But none of them owns a house or has any other assets to speak of. As one of the men succinctly pointed out, "gangsters don't get pensions."

One joked about having a "mid-life crisis" in thinking about his future. He is a leader. He is very smart, as they all are. He is articulate, and has a presence and a nervous energy about him. He could have been very successful in mainstream life had his early life been different. All of them could have had different lives. "We're not dumb guys. We figured out

how to f'ing take over neighbourhoods, worked our way through prison, make mass money selling drugs." It is very easy to imagine him as a successful high profile businessman.

But he is not. "I grew up in a cell by myself." He has virtually no formal schooling. "I lost out on a lot of things... I don't have a lot of things in my life." And he is now approaching middle age and is in a "pretty f'ed up situation." He would like to own his own home. "I don't want to live in poverty in the North End.... I gotta figure out a legitimate way to live." But his choices now are limited. Given his upbringing, they always were.

These men are not looking for sympathy, and would not accept it if offered. They are hard men who have lived hard and often violent lives, and they make no pretense of being otherwise. They say, simply as a matter of fact, that they have relatively little to show for it. But they don't want the cycle to go on. They are looking for alternatives, for themselves, but even more so for the next generation. "I don't want it to go through another generation."

### **Concern about the Young Ones**

There are young children in the inner city right at this moment for whom the street gang life is "normal," and who are being caught up in its vicious cycle. They are "the next me," as was said more than once by street gang members in our two-day conversation. They are street gang members in the making. They are gun violence waiting to happen.

It may come as a surprise to many, but this situation worries the six men we

spoke with. What emerged most strongly during our meeting was that these men do not want youngsters in the North End, the little kids, the “young ones,” to go through what they have gone through. They are concerned about children in the North End who are now facing the same circumstances—and thus potentially the same futures—as them. “Those are the ones you have to help to slow the violence.” They expressed this concern repeatedly and on occasion quite emotionally. Some of them have children of their own. Some have little cousins, all have nephews and nieces. “I don’t want to see them in ten years doing the exact same thing that I just finished f’ing learning from. I went to jail for a long time. I don’t need them to go to jail, doing the exact same thing that I learned.... You need to help those little kids get off the street.”

Yet they see every day that little kids are in poverty just as they were, surviving on a “thing of baloney and a loaf of bread.” Their parents are not there for them. So when they’re given a \$20 bill and see a wad of cash, “they know this is the way.”

The young ones have a glamourized view of the gang life. For many today, it is “normal,” just as it was for the six men when they were the young ones. And if the parents cannot look after their kids because they have addictions or suffer some of the other consequences of poverty, and if the social support system does not look after them, then according to these street gang members, “we’ll look after them.”

This is not a boast. This is not a case of gangsters acting as Robin Hood. They are not social workers, and they are at

pains to emphasize that they are not “do-gooders.” But the hard-headed reality—they are emphatic about the importance of seeing the hard realities of life in the North End—is that some of these kids will adopt the gang life. Their central experience, which they recounted over and over, is that it is not the gangs that are at the root of the problem, however worse the gangs may make the situation. It is the poverty of the North End that produces the street gangs and the gangsters. And it will continue to produce them—unless we do something differently.

*“You need to help those little kids get off the street.”*

### **There are Alternatives**

It became obvious to us that there are alternatives. It may well be the case, as one of the street gang members said, that gang-related violence can never be completely eliminated. But he was insistent—and we agree—that it can be dramatically reduced. We can choke off the supply of street gang members, and thus gang violence, by changing the soil in which they grow.

We take completely seriously the phrase oft-repeated over our two days of conversations: “If you want to change the violence in the ‘hood, you have to change the ‘hood.” Anything less is not ‘tough’ enough. Anything less means the inevitable reproduction of the cycle that produces street gangs and gangsters, and reproduces the violence that is an integral and inevitable aspect of the way they make their living. Anything less is actually being ‘soft’ on crime.

## Shift How We Think About This Problem

The street gangs are now a part of the problem, although not its root cause. If meaningful change is to occur, they need to become a part of the solution. At least some existing street gang members will respond to opportunities that open different doors to them. There are gang members who are locked into the life they chose when young who would take a different road if it were offered to them today, especially if that different road were designed to fit their realities and build on their skills and abilities. And there are some street gang members who can become “spokespeople for something different,” and who would be the best possible spokespersons because they know the hard reality of street gang life. As one of the men said, “I’ve done this all my life

*“I would talk to the young ones and tell them how it really is.... It’s not all that great.”*

and I really haven’t got anywhere.” If he had the opportunity, he said, “I would talk to the young ones and tell them how it really is.... It’s not all that great.”

## Create the Right Kinds of Jobs

An issue that came across clearly in our conversations with the men was the importance of building pride and self esteem. “What we never had was that sense of belonging. That sense of—I don’t know how you say it—you feel good about yourself because you accomplished something. You make a legitimate pay cheque because you worked and you’re learning something.”

Many street gang members would take legitimate jobs if the right kinds of jobs

were to become available. We know this with certainty because some are already doing so, and others are lined up wanting to do so. This is important because it became painfully obvious to us how alienated these men are from mainstream society. They are severely lacking in self-confidence as regards life outside the North End and their street gang, and they admit this readily. As one said, the “whole confidence thing’s a real big one.”

So they are not going to walk into a regular job with non-Aboriginal staff and management. We might say they should. But again, as one so pointedly put it, we should not get hung up on “these fantasy issues of ‘it shouldn’t be that way.’ It is!” This is simply the hard-headed reality, and we are all well-advised to follow their determination to deal with reality as it is for them. They will not simply walk into a regular job. Their physical appearance, their demeanour, their often rough language, would not fit.

As one of the men told us, “Give them that self esteem where they do something, to accomplish something, to gratify their own self esteem with a pay cheque. That’s going to help them. That’s going to benefit them. And it’s not only going to benefit them, it’s going to benefit the young ones ‘cause they’re seeing it. And it’s going to benefit the community because then they’re bringing their pride to themselves. You can carry yourself with pride or you can carry yourself like a thug. Thugging ain’t gonna give you that. A man who carries himself with pride cares about his community, cares about the people.”

Rather than try to force them to change in order to be able to fit into jobs, we

need to change the jobs in order to fit them and their reality. We need to create the specially designed jobs that they will do and feel good about doing and that will produce benefits for all of us.

### **Ogijita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin (OPK)**

One strategy that can produce this result is found in Ogijita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin (OPK), a North End, community-based program that works with Aboriginal street gang members. They learn construction skills on the job in the course of renovating North End houses. The men who work with OPK are proud of what they do. They get up each morning happy to be going to work. They feel a sense of pride and dignity when they see what they can accomplish. They feel good about themselves, and they feel good that they are giving back to their 'hood.

All of the street gang members we met with said explicitly that if given the opportunity they would join OPK to learn new skills and build a different future. Those skills include an immersion in Aboriginal culture. Learning about who they are as Aboriginal people is very attractive to these street gang members. It too builds a sense of pride and dignity, and is a central part of the success of OPK.

OPK currently has 9.5 employees and a budget of about \$450,000 per year. We have been told that there are at least 30 other young Aboriginal men, most with street gang affiliations, who would like to join OPK. This is with no advertising whatsoever, as word of mouth leads young men involved with street gangs

to approach OPK wanting to work in a legitimate job, even though the hourly wage is extremely modest. To expand the number of OPK workers from 9.5 to 40 would perhaps cost another \$1 million.

Men who are involved in street gangs are currently on a path that will likely lead them into prison. Federal imprisonment

*“A man who carries himself with pride cares about his community, cares about the people.”*

costs us all about \$80,000 per year per inmate. If the 30 men who are interested in working with OPK end up following this path, then it will cost us \$2.4 million per year to keep them locked up. With these figures, it quickly becomes obvious that we not only have the potential to reduce the level of violence, but save money at the same time by investing in an expansion of the work that an organization such as OPK does.

We also know that young men and women—at least some of them people who might otherwise be attracted to street gang membership—are working in significant numbers with the BUILD programs in the North End. One of these programs involves renovations to a number of large Manitoba Housing units. To its credit the provincial government has agreed to hire locally, and there has been no difficulty in finding workers. Another program involves retrofitting buildings. Again, large numbers of young people have signed on to do this work, likely saving the province considerable cost by steering these youngsters into the workforce and away from crime.

The evidence is clear: young Aboriginal people in the inner city are prepared to work. We need to create the kinds of

jobs that are attractive to them, and that involve their doing work that is useful to all of us. In doing so, we enable them to build pride—in themselves and in their community.

### **Spokespersons for Something Different**

Some street gang members could usefully be hired as “spokespersons for something different.” Granted, this strategy might be seen as rewarding people for their illegal activities. But if we can identify some street gang members who could do this job, two positive outcomes could be achieved. First, they could dissuade some youngsters from a life of crime because they would have the street credibility to reach those kids who will otherwise become street gang members because of the circumstances in which they are growing up. Second, they could earn the kind of modest living doing so that would

*“This is a hard life. I would prefer not to live this life.”*

take them off the streets and out of the violent lifestyle that some feel they are now locked into.

Would they do this? Would they abandon the life of crime that they have lived their entire adult lives? We asked the men we met with directly about that, and challenged them when they answered. One of the leaders said: “If I could get employed in a position like that ... I think I could give something to a position like that—a lot ... I think I’d bring a lot to it ... I have the experience.” If he and some others like him were employed as community workers, working with kids and explaining to them the realities of street gang life and the fact that there are better alternatives, we would

be turning what is now an important part of the problem into what could be a part of the solution.

It is the fact that these guys are not getting rich from the street gang life—far from it—and that they face the risk of continually being sent back to prison as long as they are engaged in criminal activities that leads us to believe that at least some of them will seize legitimate, specially designed employment opportunities if these are made available. “Why bother to go commit crimes” if there is a real alternative, one said, when the risks are so high. “I’ll probably get caught.” And besides, “this is a hard life. I would prefer not to live this life.” It follows that as a society we should invest in creating alternative opportunities.

### **Investing in the Inner City**

More broadly, we need to invest in the inner city. There was a deep resentment repeatedly expressed by the street gang members about the lack of resources in the North End. They expressed anger about the fact that there are so few community recreation centres available for North End kids, so few places that are drop-in centres where kids can go when they need someone to talk with because things aren’t good at home. “If you look at the city of Winnipeg, where’s the biggest problems? In the north side. What’s in the north side? Nothing.” Their anger is fuelled by the fact that they see the money going elsewhere. People who live and work in the North End have repeatedly demanded more public investment in order to deal with the problems that exist there and that breed the street gangs and violence.

Governments have to take on their responsibility to be honest with the public about these issues, and to educate the public by saying: we want to invest your tax dollars in solving these problems. We are tired of the violence and we know there are no quick fixes and no band-aids. We know that there is no aspirin that will take away the pain in half an hour. We know that if we want to change the violence in the 'hood we have to change the 'hood. And that is going to require public investment.

If we begin to do this, and if a part of that investment is used to create meaningful and well-designed alternatives for street gang members, the ripple effect will be significant over time. As one of the six said, if you make a difference with one kid, and then another, in a few years it is many, and then "there's a change in the North End." And when the North End starts to change, so will the violence.

### **Re-Building Families and Communities**

As these changes begin to unfold, families will be rebuilt. Strong and healthy families are essential in preventing street gang activity. While there are many strong and healthy families in Winnipeg's North End and inner city, many others are now broken and unhealthy. The deep deterioration of family and community in the North End and broader inner city is a cause of street gangs and their activities.

This deterioration has to do with broad socio-economic forces over which those who live in the North End and broader inner city have little control. Because the

disintegration of family and community in the inner city presents itself as *behavioural* problems, there is a strong, common sense tendency to blame those engaged in the bad behaviour. But simply blaming those who engage in the bad behaviour gets us nowhere. The behaviour is a response, an adaptation, to the structures, to the poverty-related conditions in which people live. If we change the structures, the behaviour will gradually change. This insight is what we interpret the street gang members to mean when they told us: "If you want to change the violence in the 'hood, you have to change the 'hood."

*"Quality of life. That's what it's about."*

Among the changes that public investment in the inner city would produce would be a much-needed strengthening and rebuilding of families. In the case of Aboriginal people this would mean a strengthening of extended families, enabling more of the collective sharing that characterizes Aboriginal cultures, creating an even greater ripple effect as more and more people earn a living doing work that is useful to all of us. "Their kids are gonna see them working, right from a baby up. My dad works for a living. My dad doesn't steal. We've got food in our fridge. Nobody has to steal. Nobody has to sell drugs. It's not part of our life. Their kids are gonna see that ... Influence, way of life, seeing what's around you. Quality of life. That's what it's about." And as families and communities get stronger and healthier, and more young people see that there are other ways than the street gang to live a life that is not ground down by poverty, the soil in which street gangs now grow will become less fertile.

None of this will happen overnight. But since there are no short-term solutions, we would all be better off if we supported public investment now to build a better, less violent future.

### **Learning from the Wisdom of Street Gangsters**

The six Aboriginal street gang members wanted to tell their story. They have grown up in the North End and they know the realities of life in the North End. They are fed up with the simplistic ideas repeatedly promoted in the media and in public discourse about how to find a quick fix for inner-city problems. They wanted to tell us—and they did tell us in no uncertain terms—that there is no quick fix. The solutions to these problems will take time. “It’s going to take time. The North End didn’t get f’ed up overnight. The North End’s been f’ed up for years. It’s going to take years again to establish the sort of programs, initiatives, and so forth to make it better.” Solutions will require a commitment from the public and from governments to invest in the North End and broader inner city. This is how to save lives, both those lost from gunfire and those wasted in a life of crime that eventually leaves them with nothing.

As a society we are much better off if we accept that imprisonment, however nec-

essary in individual cases, is not a solution to the problem of street gangs and violence. “There’s not enough jail space,” one said, to solve the problem this way—unless, of course, more prisons are built, as has been done in the United States. Were that to be done, were we to fill the prisons with still more young Aboriginal men—more than 70 percent of the prison population in Manitoba is Aboriginal—the violence would only continue.

There is no quick and easy solution because we have let the problem grow for far too long. As a society we have to stop reaching for an aspirin in the vain hope that it will all go away in half an hour. If we want to change the violence in the ‘hood, we would do well to heed the wise advice of these hard-headed men who know the ‘hood all too well. We have to change the ‘hood.

These street gang members, all of whom have served time in federal and provincial penal institutions, brought wisdom to this important issue that has been largely missing in the public debate about inner-city violence. They have the lived experience that is always important in solving any kind of problem. They are now a part of the problem, and they know that, but they can be a part of the solution if we collectively have the courage and creativity to go down that road.