

# Evaluation of the Youth At Risk Development (YARD) Program

## Final Report *Executive Summary*

*Completed for*

The City of Calgary, Community and  
Neighbourhood Services, Children and Youth  
Services, and

The Calgary Police Service,  
Community and Youth Services Section

*By*

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Calgary, Alberta  
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# Youth At Risk Development (YARD) Program Evaluation

## Overview

Launched in 2008 by the Calgary Police Service (CPS) and The City of Calgary, Children and Youth Services (CYS), YARD seeks to prevent or stop gang involvement and criminal behaviour among youth aged 10 to 17 years. To this end, YARD works to reduce or mitigate research-identified factors that place young people at risk of gang and other criminal involvement and to introduce or strengthen the factors that can improve at-risk youths' developmental trajectories and longer-term success in life.



*If it wasn't for the YARD program, I would probably be still hanging out with the wrong people and making bad decisions.*

**The independent evaluation concluded that YARD is an effective program and should be continued and replicated in other jurisdictions. Participation in the YARD program prevented or reduced criminal and gang involvement. Youth who participated in the program were less likely to be charged with criminal offences after participation in YARD and, when followed over time, they were less likely to be charged with criminal offences than comparison groups of similar at-risk youth who did not participate in YARD.**

Youth are referred to YARD by a variety of sources, including police, probation, teachers and community agencies. Youth who meet the eligibility criteria are invited to participate. Those who agree, and whose parents or guardians consent to their child's participation, are accepted into the program. Once accepted, a youth is assigned to a staff team consisting of a police officer and a social worker. In consultation with the client and, where possible, his parents or caregivers, the team develops an individualized case plan. The case plan identifies the youth's unique strengths and weaknesses across developmental domains, targets specific goals, and introduces programs and interventions to help the youth achieve his goals. These programs and interventions may include educational, training, and employment programs; leadership programs; supports for the family; counselling; and recreational activities, all of which are specifically selected to address individual risk factors, but also to help the youth build positive relationships and to create supportive environments to both buffer the risks and promote positive youth development during and beyond the client's involvement with the program. For many youth, the services and supports provided by the YARD team are intensive. In short, YARD tries to do "whatever it takes" to help each client to succeed.

Few Canadian gang prevention and intervention programs have undergone rigorous evaluation to establish whether they are effective. In 2011, The City of Calgary and the Calgary Police Service engaged Guyn Cooper Research Associates Ltd., an independent research company, to complete a three-year quasi-experimental evaluation to determine whether YARD prevents or reduces criminal and gang involvement.

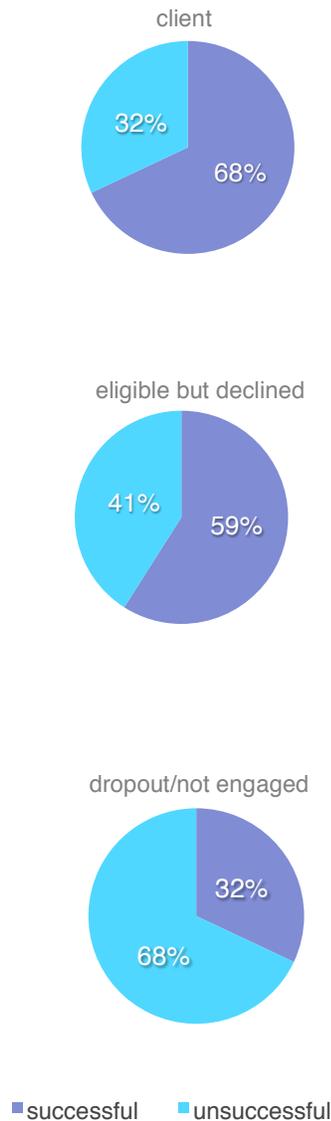
The independent evaluation concluded that YARD is an effective program and should be continued and replicated in other jurisdictions. Participation in the YARD program prevented or reduced criminal and gang involvement. Youth who participated in the program were less likely to be charged with criminal offences after participation in YARD and, when followed over time, they were less likely to be charged with criminal offences than comparison groups of similar at-risk youth who did not participate in YARD.

This report provides a brief summary of the key evaluation findings. The full evaluation report is available upon request from The City of Calgary, Community and Neighbourhood Services, Child and Youth Services.

## Key findings

### Key finding 1: YARD participation led to decreased criminal involvement

**Figure 1: Criminal engagement**  
(N=148)

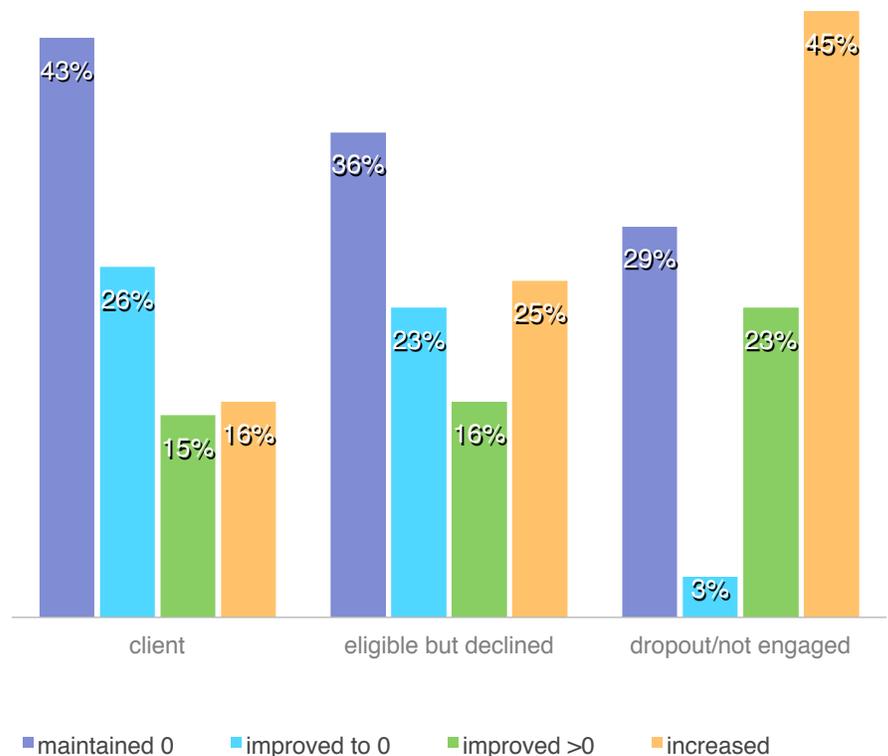


A key component of the evaluation was to determine whether YARD participation decreases criminal involvement. Therefore, the evaluation included measurement of clients' criminal involvement before and after participation, and comparison of clients' pre- and post-program criminal involvement against that of two comparison groups: (i) young people who were eligible to participate, invited to participate, and declined to participate, and; (ii) young people who were eligible to participate, invited to participate, and agreed to participate, but dropped out of the program before they received any services.

To ensure that the integrity of the data indicating degree and type of criminal involvement was not compromised by the slow pace of the justice system, in this evaluation, number and type of criminal charges and charge date, rather than convictions, were tracked. Conviction date would provide no indication of the time at which the young person was actually involved in criminal activity, as it can take months or even years for a case to reach the courts.

The criminal charge data show that participation in the YARD program prevented or reduced criminal and gang involvement. Youth who participated in the program were less likely to be charged with criminal offences after participation in YARD and, when followed over time, they were less likely to be charged with criminal offences than comparison groups of similar, at-risk youth who did not participate in YARD.

**Figure 2: Change in criminal charges, categories** (N=148)

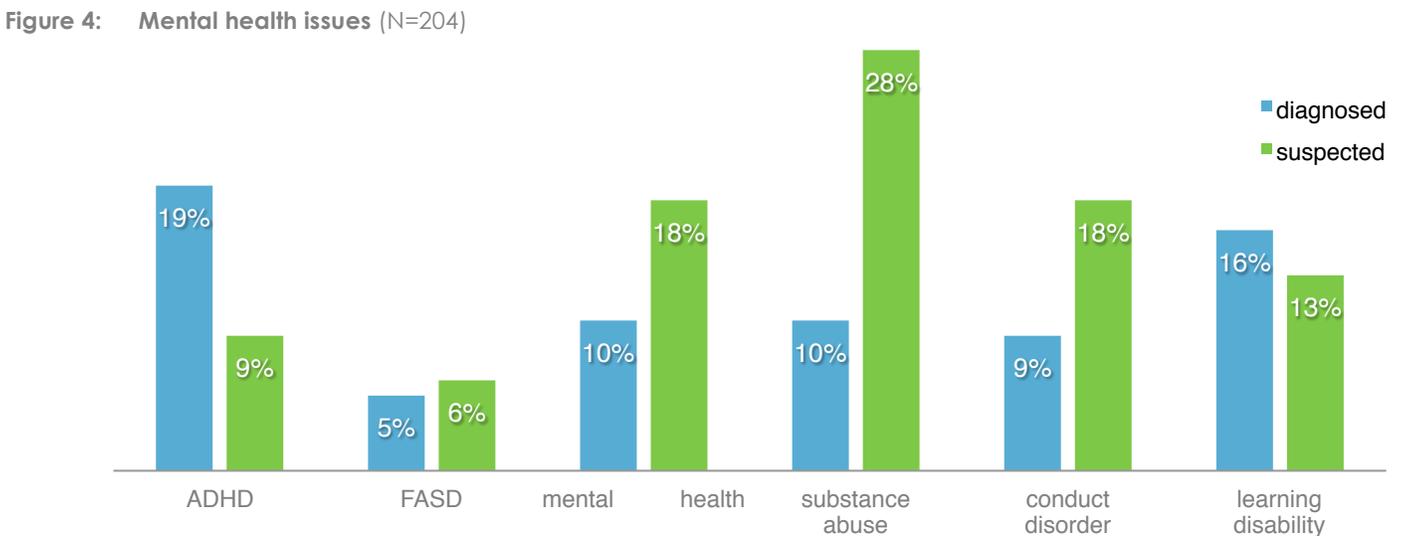
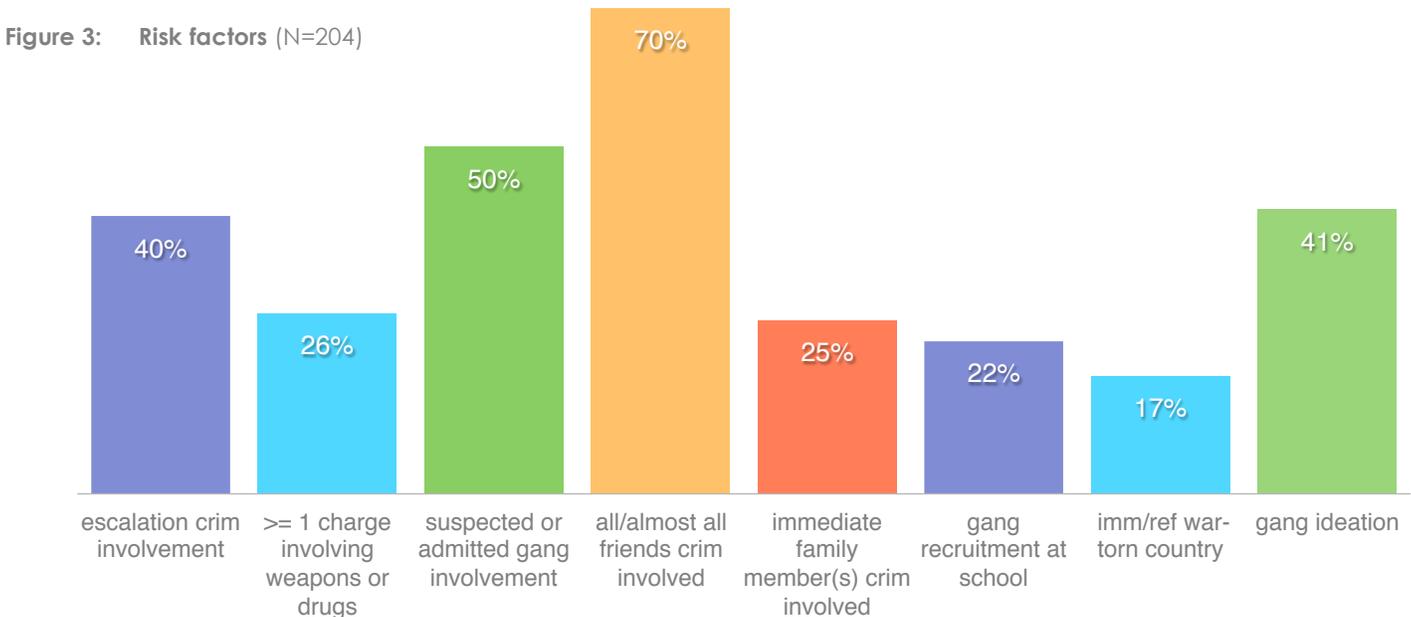


**Key finding 2:** YARD served youth who were at high risk of criminal and gang involvement

Most YARD clients were male (88%) and aged 13 to 16 (72%), and the majority (79%) were attending school in some capacity at time of referral, although most had been suspended or expelled at some point. Most clients were members of three population groups as defined by Statistics Canada: Caucasian, African/Caribbean, or Aboriginal (13%-29% each). As well, 23% of clients were not born in Canada.

At the time of referral, most clients were suspected of being gang involved, and high percentages of clients had been diagnosed with or were suspected of having mental health, substance abuse, conduct disorders, and/or learning issues. All of these factors increase the likelihood that a young person will be or become involved in criminal activity. However, those particular risk factors are not sufficient to be eligible for the YARD program. Rather, YARD considers eight research-identified risk factors specific to gang involvement, as shown in Figure 3 below.

Having any one of these eight risk factors, or a combination of specific secondary and tertiary risk factors, means that a youth is eligible for YARD. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, all but two clients had two or more primary risk factors, and most had a large number of total risk factors (7 to 16), with three clients having 22 risk factors.



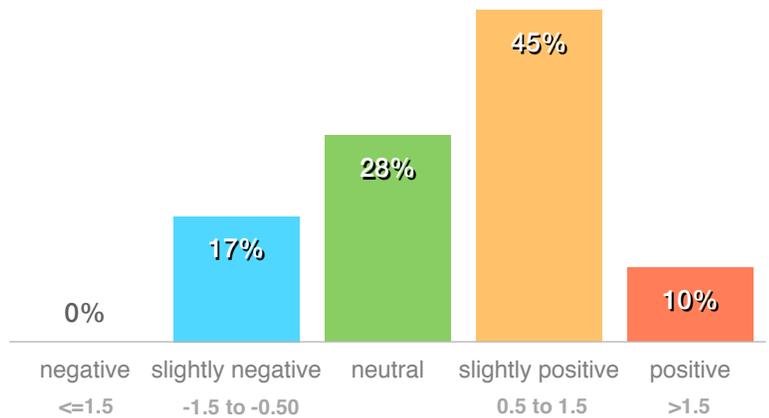
**Key finding 3:** Participation in YARD resulted in positive changes in selected risk and protective factors for criminal and gang involvement

Despite the relatively small set of matched pre- and post-participation data on risk and protective factors, some degree of positive change occurred with respect to parental monitoring, peer influences, emotional self-regulation, pro- and anti-social attitudes. Improvements in constructive use of time and self-concept were statistically significant.

Interestingly, the proportion of clients who identified an adult role model they would like to emulate and those who said they had an adult to talk to if there was trouble at home both *declined* after participation. Closer inspection of the data revealed, however, that many of the adults that the youth initially admired and emulated were older male relatives and friends who were criminally involved. After YARD participation, these youth no longer admired these men. Many could not identify a single positive adult role model in their lives, and most of those who could chose a male member of the YARD team as the person they would like to emulate.

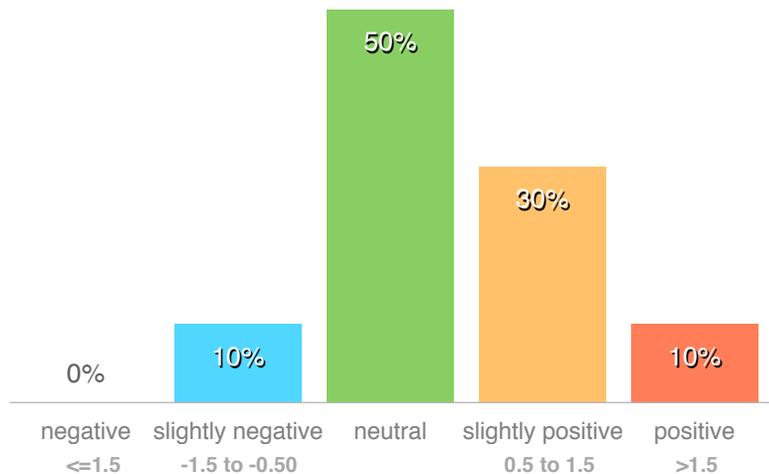
**Figure 5:** Change in average score – Constructive use of time (N=29)

Figure 5 shows that, after participating in YARD, almost half of clients were spending significantly more time in constructive activities (sports, clubs, working) and significantly less time hanging out in the community or at the mall with nothing special to do.



**Figure 6:** Change in average score – Self concept (N=20)

Figure 6 shows that, after participating in YARD, 40% of clients had significantly improved scores on measures of self-concept and self-esteem.



## Conclusions

1. Based on the results of this evaluation, there is considerable evidence that YARD is delivering services to the appropriate target population, has a positive effect on some dimensions of youth development, and decreases criminal activity among participants. **This allows us to conclude that the YARD program is an effective crime prevention initiative and to recommend that it be continued.**
2. **The YARD service delivery model is a key component of program success, but the skill and commitment of the staff are also important.** Although it is difficult to quantify, there is little doubt that the program's success is at least partly attributable to the intensity of the services provided by the program and the tenacity of staff members in assisting and building relationships with clients.
3. There is some evidence YARD's impact on clients with **major mental health issues** may be limited. Regardless of the quality of the YARD program and its efforts to help youth to obtain treatment, it is difficult for young people to move forward in their lives when they are wrestling with debilitating mental health challenges.

*This program could give you  
a chance to live life the way  
you want it to be ...*



## YARD clients said it best

When asked by the evaluators for feedback about the YARD program, there were no significant negative comments from clients. Representative examples of what clients said about the program include the following:

*They are a really great program. I don't know what I would have done without [YARD staff]. I would probably still be in jail or in trouble. [YARD staff] helped me rebuild my future and finish school after I was in jail.*

*[YARD was] a great program, any kid should join YARD... [The workers are] very kind, caring people – always there when you need them.*

*This program could give you a chance to live life the way you want it to be... when you are down, [YARD staff] builds you up and motivates you. You need to work for it, but the program can change your life.*

*If it wasn't for the YARD program I would probably be still hanging out with the wrong people and making bad decisions.*

*I love [YARD staff], he's been there for me always!*

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