

***RESTORING HOPE:***  
**AN EVALAUTION OF THE PEACEBUILDERS CANADA'S**  
**RESTORATIVE YOUTH CIRCLES PROGRAM**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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**Toronto, August 2020**

## **PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

- Restorative Youth Circles (RYC) is a restorative justice-based court diversion program for young people between 12 and 18 years of age;
- The program is operated by Peacebuilders Canada. Peacebuilders Canada has a permanent office at the 311 Jarvis Youth Court;
- The majority of RYC cases are the result of extrajudicial sanctions (EJS) and subsequent referrals from Crown Attorneys, defence counsel, judges or probation officers;
- The first stage of the RYC program is hosted at the Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment (MLSE) LaunchPad. This stage of the program is entitled Leaders of Tomorrow (LOT);
- As an engagement strategy, youth first participate in various sports, games and recreational activities designed to build rapport;
- Youth then come together to engage in peer-led Peacebuilding Circles. During these group circles youth have conversations regarding Peacebuilders' core values: respect, empathy, responsibility, courage and leadership;
- Clients complete an average of six peer circles per program cycle before moving onto the second stage of the RYC program;
- The second stage of the RYC program involves individual circles. Two trained Circle Keepers are assigned to each client;
- Circle Keepers try to build trust with each youth, learn about their life circumstances and develop an understanding of the events that led to the client's current charges;
- Victims and co-accused are invited to participate in the individual circles when appropriate;
- During individual circles, clients discuss their offense. The youth then works with the Circle Keepers to develop a strategy to repair the harm caused and draft a personal reflection piece;
- During the individual circles, the youth and Peacebuilders' staff develop a plan to help the youth achieve educational and career goals and stay out of trouble in the future;
- On average, it takes six or seven individual circle session to complete the RYC program.
- Once the individual circle process is complete, the Justice Program manager and Circle Keepers prepare a court report outlining the client's progress. This report is shared with the court;
- Consistent with the goals of diversion, if the youth completes the RYC program, and has made genuine efforts to take responsibility for their alleged illegal behaviour, charges are formally withdrawn;

## METHODOLOGY

- The evaluation is based on information derived from both intake (pre-test) interviews and exit (post-test) interviews conducted with youth participants;
- Intake interviews were conducted with 86 RYC participants. Intake interviews took place between September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017 and November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019;
- Exit interviews were completed with 53 participants (response rate=61.6%). Exit interviews took place between March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018 and January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020;

### *Sample Description*

- During the study period, over 84.9% of RYC participants were male;
- Participants ranged in age from 13 to 18 years (mean=15.7 years; median=16.0 years; mode=17 years);
- Almost half of the participants (44.2%) reported that they reside with their mother only. An additional 40.7% reside with both their mother and father;
- Over 80% of the sample were born in Canada.
- Almost half of the participants (43.0%) self-reported that they are of Black or African Canadian heritage. Slightly less than a quarter of respondents (24.4%) reported that they are White, 15.2% are South Asian and 13.9% are of a mixed race or biracial background.
- Three out of every four respondents (76.7%) report English as their first language;

## RESULTS FROM INTAKE INTERVIEWS

### *Current Charges and Offending History*

- The majority of youth who entered the RYC program, during the study period, were charged with a serious criminal offence;
- Over 80% were charged with at least one violent offence including assault (36.0%), robbery (23.3%), weapons possession (9.3%), assault with a weapon (8.1%), and uttering threats (7.0%);
- Only ten respondents (11.6% of the sample) were charged with a nonviolent offence including theft/fraud (8.1%), drug trafficking (2.4%) and publishing intimate images (1.2%);
- Two-thirds of the clients were first offenders. However, a third had faced previous criminal charges and 34.9% had been previously enrolled in another youth diversion program;
- Almost all participants (96.5%) have experienced school disciplinary problems: 59.3% have been suspended, 17.4% have been expelled, and 19.8% have been a “safe school” transfer;

### ***Arrest Details***

- Two-thirds of RYC participants report being arrested by the police. The other third turned themselves in to the authorities to face charges;
- Nine out of ten youth report that their arrest involved being handcuffed by the police;
- A third of arrest incidents took place at school;
- Two-thirds involved at least one co-accused;
- Only 30.2% of participants believe that the charges they are facing are fair;
- Although many participants question the validity of their charges, almost all (87.2%) take responsibility for their actions. These participants may believe that they must take responsibility in order to take part in the diversion process;

### ***Program Referrals***

- Most program participants (83.2%) were referred by either a Crown attorney (42.5%) or defence counsel (40.7%);
- An additional 16.3% were referred by a probation officer, 4.7% were referred by a community organization and two participants (2.3% of the sample) were referred by school officials;
- One participant referred themselves to the program;
- No participants were referred to the program by the police;

### ***Perceived Fairness of Treatment***

- During the intake interview, all participants were asked how fairly they had been treated by various justice personnel. The results clearly suggest that participants view their treatment by the police as more unfair than their treatment by other justice personnel;
- More than half the participants (52.4%) feel that they were treated unfairly by the police. By contrast, only 8.1% feel that they were treated unfairly by the judge assigned to their case, only 2.3% feel that they were treated unfairly by their lawyer and only 1.2% feel that they were treated unfairly by their probation officer;

### ***Willingness of Program Participation***

- During the intake interview, all youth were asked whether they wanted to participate in the RYC program;
- Three out of four youth (77.9%) wanted to participate in the program. Only 19.8% indicated that they did not want to participate;

### ***Reasons for Participation***

- Respondents who wanted to participate in the program were asked why they wanted to take part in this initiative;
- Three out of four participants (71.6%) indicated that they wanted to participate in the program to get their charges dropped or withdrawn.
- Another third (34.3%) indicated that they wanted to participate in the program for reasons of self-improvement.
- A quarter of the respondents (23.9%) indicated that they wanted to enroll in the RYC program to meet new people, try a new activity or have an enjoyable experience;

### ***Reasons for not Wanting to Participate***

- The seventeen respondents who stated that they did not want to participate in the RYC were asked why they did not want to participate;
- Half of these participants (52.9%) indicated that they were being forced to participate in the program;
- Thirty percent anticipated that the program would be too long or time consuming;
- Other reasons for not wanting to participate include the belief that the program is ineffective or a *waste of time* (23.5%), the program location is too far from home (23.4%), or because the youth feels innocent of the charges laid against them (11.8%);
- One respondent (5.9%) indicated that he did not want to participate in the RYC because of a dispute with participants from a rival community;

### ***Program Expectations***

- During the intake interview, all participants were asked whether they were hopeful that the RYC program could help them improve their life;
- Most participants (61.5%) were either “hopeful” (27.9%) or “very hopeful” that the program could help them;
- An additional 15.2% felt a “little hopeful;”
- Only 4 participants (4.7% of the sample) stated that they were “not hopeful” that the program would be beneficial;
- Almost a fifth (18.6%) of participants did not know whether the program would help them or not;

## **RESULTS OF THE EXIT INTERVIEWS**

### ***Program Completion***

- According to Peacebuilders' records, 62 of the 86 youth who entered the RYC program during the study period (72.1%) completed the program;
- An additional 5 respondents (5.8%) were still enrolled in the program, and slated for program graduation, at the time that data collection for this study came to an end;
- Twelve of the original 86 participants (14.0%) either failed or dropped out of the program. An additional 7 respondents (8.6%) were transferred to another diversion program;
- Additional analysis reveals that the program completion rate did not vary significantly by participant gender, age, country of birth, language, nature of current offense, or criminal history;
- However, the data do reveal that the program completion rate for White participants (95.2%) is significantly higher than the program completion rate for racial minority participants (72.3%);
- Furthermore, 11 of the 12 program failures identified as a racial minority (91.7%), as did 100% of the program transfers. The reasons for these racial disparities must be explored in the next stage of the evaluation;
- At the end of the data completion period, 53 of the original 86 participants (61.6%) had completed both the program entry (pre-test) and program exit (post-test) interviews;
- An additional nine respondents (10.5%) had completed the program, but an exit interview was not available. The exact reasons for the missing exit interviews was not available at the time of report preparation;
- The 53 participants who did complete an exit interview are the subject of the analysis presented in this section of the report.

### ***Explanation of The RYC Program Process***

- Participants were asked how well the RYC diversion process was explained to them during program intake. The majority of youth (86.8%) felt that the explanation they had received was either excellent (56.6%) or very good (30.2%);
- Zero participants (0.0%) felt that the explanation was average or poor (see Table 10);

### ***Participant Evaluation of the Group Circles***

- Participants who completed the exit interview were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with five different statements about the Group Circle stage of the RYC;
- The results indicate that the Group Circles were positively evaluated by most participants;
- Almost all participants (94.4%) reported that they felt comfortable working with the Peacebuilders' staff during the Group Circles;

- Over ninety percent of participants (92.5%) agreed that the Peacebuilders' staff were able to keep their attention during the Group Circles;
- Seven out of ten participants (69.8%) agreed that they were able to discuss things in the Group Circles that they normally would not discuss;
- Nine out of ten participants (92.4%) agreed that they had trusted the Peacebuilders' staff during the group circles;
- Finally, 84.9% of the sample agreed that they had felt comfortable talking about their feelings and experiences during Group Circle discussions;
- Participants were then asked to describe what they had enjoyed *most* about the group circles.
- Responses to this open-ended question were recoded into four categories: 1) 58.5% stated that the conversations or group discussions were the most enjoyable aspect of the Group Circles; 2) 45.3% stated that they enjoyed the opportunity to engage in sports activities; 3) 11.3% stressed that they enjoyed the food provided during the circles; and 4) 9.4% stated that they enjoyed the Group Circles because they got to meet new people and make new friends;
- Respondents were then asked to describe the Peacebuilder value that they enjoyed talking about the most. One out of four participants (28.3%) indicated that they enjoyed talking about "respect." An additional 22.6% indicated that they enjoyed talking about "trust." Other values mentioned by participants included honesty (11.3%), empathy (9.4%), forgiveness (5.7%) and humility (3.8%). Six participants (11.3% of the sample) stated that they enjoyed talking about "all" of the Peacebuilders' values;
- Respondents were then asked what they had enjoyed *least* about the Group Circles;
- Half of the respondents (49.1%) stated that there was nothing that they did not enjoy about the Group Circles;
- Seven participants (13.2%) stated that they were sometimes bothered by the disruptive behaviour of other youth in the program; Seven respondents (13.2%) stated that the group discussions were sometimes too long; Four respondents (7.5%) stated that they found it difficult to discuss their personal issues in the group context; and five participants (9.4%) stated that they disliked the amount of time and effort it took to travel to the program location;
- This section of the exit interview concluded by asking participants if there was anything that might be done to improve the Group Circles;
- Over half of the respondents (56.6%) explicitly stated that the program did not need to be improved at all. The other half provided at least one recommendation for improvement;
- Youth were split with respect to the role of sports. While five youth (9.4%) felt that the group circles should have more sports activities and less talking, another five youth felt that there should be less sports and more group discussion;
- Three youth (5.7%) felt that the group discussions should be shortened; Three youth felt that the staff could do a better job controlling the behaviour of disruptive or disengaged youth, and three youth felt that the Group Circles would benefit from higher quality food and beverages;

### *Participant Evaluations of Individual Circles*

- Participants who completed the exit interview were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with six different statements about the Individual Circle stage of the RYC program. The results clearly indicate that the Individual Circles are just as highly rated as the Group Circles;
- Almost all participants (92.5%) agreed that they felt comfortable working with the Circle Keepers. No participant indicated that they felt uncomfortable;
- Over ninety percent of participants (90.6%) agreed that the Peacebuilders' staff were able to keep their attention during the individual circles;
- 90.5% of participants agreed that they had trusted the Circle Keepers during the individual sessions;
- 88.7% of participants agreed that the Circle Keepers were able to relate to them in meaningful ways;
- 83.0% agreed that they had felt comfortable talking about themselves and their experiences during the individual sessions; and
- 81.2% agreed that they were able to discuss things during the individual circle sessions that they would not normally discuss;
- Participants were then asked to identify the things they enjoyed *most* about the Individual Circles. The majority of youth (67.9%) indicated that they enjoyed the chance to talk about their individual issues or challenges; 24.5% enjoyed the opportunity to plan for the future; and 15.1% cited the strong relationship they had developed with their Circle Keeper;
- Participants were also asked about the thing they enjoyed *least* about the individual circles;
- Twenty-nine of the fifty-three participants (54.7% of the sample) claimed that there was nothing about the individual circles that they did not enjoy or appreciate;
- Eight participants (15.1%) complained about how long it took to travel to the program location;
- Six participants (11.3%) indicated that they did not like discussing their charges, four stated that they sometimes found the circles boring (7.5%), and four stated that they did not like writing the reflection paper (7.5%);
- One participant said that they did not like attending circles on the weekend, one stated that the circles were too long, one thought the circles were too short, and one respondent did not like the food;
- This section of the exit interview concluded by asking participants what might be done to improve the individual circles;
- Two-thirds (67.9%) of the participants felt that the RYC program did not require improvement;
- However, 17 participants (32.1% of the sample) did provide at least one recommendation: Six participants (11.3%) felt that, to reduce travel times for participants, the program would benefit from additional locations;
- Three respondents (5.7%) thought that the program would benefit from better food, three participants (5.7%) thought that there should be more activities and less talk, two (3.8%)

thought there should be more time for discussion and fewer activities, and two (3.8%) noted that the program would benefit from more staff.

### ***Perceived Impact of Program on Client Decision-making***

- All participants who completed the exit interview were asked to think about the incident that had led to their current charges. They were then asked: “If the same situation happened now, how do you think you would respond?”
- Forty-three of the fifty-three participants (81.1%) stated that they would make a decision that would prevent the offence from occurring;
- The other ten participants (18.9%) stated that they did not know or were unsure how they would act;
- No participant stated that they would act in the same manner;
- If faced with the same set of circumstances, 28.3% of participants indicated that they would “just walk away,” 26.4% stated that they would “think about their future” and disengage from the conflict, 13.2% stated that they would never put themselves in that type of situation again, and 11.3% stated that they would call the police or a teacher for assistance;

### ***Overall Program Impact***

- All participants who completed the exit interview were asked a series of questions about the perceived effectiveness of the RYC program and the impact they think it will have on their lives;
- The results indicate that the program is very popular with participants and that they think it will have a positive impact on their future behaviour and life outcomes;
- Almost ninety percent of participants (86.7%) believe that the RYC program will make it easier to avoid future conflicts.
- Eight out of every ten participants (79.2%) believe that the program will make it easier for them to avoid trouble with the police or criminal courts;
- The results further reveal that although participants were hopeful before starting the program, they became even more hopeful after program completion. For example, during the intake interview, 63.9% of participants were hopeful that the RYC would help them improve their life. This figure rises to 88.7% during the exit interview. This difference is statistically significant;
- Participants were next asked if they were happy that they had enrolled in the RYC program. Nine out of ten participants (92%) indicated that they were either happy (36.0%) or very happy (56%) that they had taken part in the program;
- Respondents were also asked whether the RYC program had met their initial expectations. The results reveal that the program exceeded the expectations of almost three-quarters of participants (72.0%). An additional 28.0% indicated that the program had met their expectations. Not a single participant (0.0%) stated that the program had failed to meet their expectations;

- Participants were next asked to rate the performance of the Peacebuilders' staff who had run the RYC program. Seven out of ten participants (70.6%) expressed that the staff were "excellent." An additional 27.5% rated the staff as "very good." Only one respondent rated the RYC staff as "good." Not a single participant (0.0%) rated the staff as "average" or "poor."
- Participants were also asked to rate the performance of the Circle Keepers. Three out of every four RYC participants reported that the Circle Keepers were "excellent." An additional 17.6% rated them as "very good" and 5.9% rated them as "good." Not a single participant rated the Circle Keepers as "average" or "poor."
- Respondents were asked to provide an overall rating of the RYC program. Once again, the results are very positive. Two-out of three participants (66.7%) rated the program as "excellent." An additional 23.5% rated the program as "very good" and 9.8% ranked it as "good." Not a single participant rated the program as either "average" or "poor."
- Finally, participants were asked whether they would recommend the RYC program to other young people. Nine out of ten participants (86.8%) indicated that they would either recommend (34.0%) or strongly recommend (52.8%) the program. One participant indicated that they would recommend the program with "some reservations." Only one participant stated that they would not recommend the RYC program to other youth.

### ***Pre-test/Post-test Changes in Youth Outcomes***

- The intake interview included a few questions that were repeated in the exit interview. These questions allow for an analysis of pre-test/post-test changes in youth attitudes and behaviours;
- The first series of questions pertain to the participants' engagement in specific routine activities. An objective of the RYC program was to increase youth participation in supervised, prosocial activities that reduce the risk of subsequent offending;
- The results reveal a slight increase in particular supervised activities between the pre-test and post-test interviews. For example, after participating in the RYC, youth appear more likely to volunteer with a community organization (60.4% vs. 50.9%), volunteer at school (60.4% vs. 50.9%) and spend time in paid employment (52.8% vs. 41.5%);
- A paired sample t-test reveals that, between the intake and exit interviews, RYC participants experienced a statistically significant increase in their level of involvement with prosocial, supervised activities;
- Another goal of the RYC program was to promote self-efficacy amongst youth participants. To measure self-efficacy, youth were asked to complete the ten-question *General Self-Efficacy Scale* during both the intake and exit interviews;
- *The General Self-Efficacy Scale* ranges from 10 to 40. The higher the score on the scale the higher the reported level of self-efficacy;
- The results reveal that average scores on the scale increased from 30.77 during the pre-test to 32.56 during the post-test. A paired sample t-test reveals that this increase is statistically significant. In other words, the results suggest that RYC participants experienced a statistically significant increase in self-efficacy as a result of program participation;

- An other objective of the RYC program is to improve youth employment and educational prospects. Although youth employment increased slightly after program participation -- from 28.3% to 35.8% -- this change is not statistically significant. Program participants were also just as likely to be enrolled in school – and on track to graduate -- during the post-test as they were during the pre-test period;

### ***Additional Charges***

- According to program records, five of the fifty-three participants who completed the exit interview (9.4% of the sample) had been charged with an additional offence since starting the program. Two participants were charged with robbery, one with assault, one with uttering threats, and one with failure to comply with court conditions. It is possible that the incidents that gave rise to these charges actually took place prior to program participation (i.e., there was a lag between the incident and subsequent charge);
- All other participants (90.6%) remained charge-free during their period of program participation.

### ***Most Important Lessons***

- All participants were asked to identify the most important lessons that they had learned because of participating in the RYC program;
- Twenty-five participants (47.2% of the sample) stated that they had learned about the consequences of engaging in crime or violence and how it can negatively impact their future;
- An additional 23 participants (43.4%) stated that they most important lesson they had learned from the program was how to become a better person or how to improve themselves;

### ***Benefits of the Program***

- Participants were also asked to identify the greatest benefits of taking part in the RYC program;
- Seventeen youth (32.1%) stated that the best thing about the program was getting their charges dropped and avoiding court;
- Twenty-three participants (43.4%) stated, once again, that the RYC program had helped them become a better person;
- Sixteen youth (30.2%) stated that a benefit of the program was getting the chance to talk about life with their peers and the Peacebuilders' staff;
- Other identified program benefits, identified by the youth participants, included the chance to participate in sports (mentioned by 13.2% of the sample) and the food provided during program sessions (mentioned by 9.4% of the sample).

### ***Program Challenges***

- All youth who participated in the exit interview were asked to identify any challenges they had observed with respect to the RYC program. Forty-eight of the fifty-three participants (90.6% of the sample) stated that they could not identify any problems with the program;
- However, three participants identified the program location as a problem, one stated that the food could be improved and one thought that the program would benefit from the dismissal of “certain” program staff.

### ***Recommendations for Program Improvement***

- All youth who completed the program were asked how the RYC could be improved;
- Thirty-five respondents (66.0% of the sample) stated that the program did not require improvement;
- However, a third of the participants (34.0%) provided at least one recommendation with respect to how the program might be improved:
- Six participants (11.3% of the sample) explicitly stated that the program would benefit from more locations. It was felt that this would reduce travel times for some youth and make it easier for them to attend program sessions;
- Five participants (9.4% of the sample) felt that the program would benefit from better food or snacks;
- Four participants (7.5% of the sample) felt that there should be more time devoted to sports activities;
- One participant felt that the program should have fewer sports activities and more group discussion;
- One participant felt that the staff needed to improve the level of youth engagement;
- One participant felt the program should have longer sessions;
- One participant felt that the program should have shorter sessions;
- One participant felt the program would benefit from improved organization;
- One participant felt that the program would benefit by offering field trips or special events;

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

The results of the current evaluation are overwhelmingly positive and extremely encouraging. However, the study was limited by a relatively small sample size (only 53 participants took part in the post-test interview). Furthermore, the study only examined youth immediately after they had completed the RYC program. Thus, little is known about the long-term impacts of the program. With this in mind, we make the following recommendations with respect to future evaluation efforts. The positive results produced by this pilot project point to the great potential of the RYC and how it deserves an even more rigorous evaluation:

1. Future evaluations should interview youth participants immediately before program participation (pre-test), immediately after program completion (post-test one), six months after program completion (post-test two) and one year after program completion (post-test three). This would enable an improved analysis of the short-term, intermediate and long-term impacts of program participation;
2. Future evaluations should attempt to gather information on a control group of youth – facing similar charges – who were not given the opportunity to participate in the RYC program. The use of a pre-test/post-test/control group design would enable the research team to draw stronger conclusions with respect to program attribution;
3. A major objective of the RYC program is the prevention of future offending. Thus, the program should work with court and police officials to track the future offending of program participants compared to members of the control group. Future offending should be tracked for at least one year following program completion;
4. Pre-test and post-test interviews should include additional items that could better document program objectives and impacts. For example, the interviews could include questions designed to measure self-reported offending and victimization, association with prosocial and deviant peers, attitudes towards crime and violence, educational performance, self-esteem and future goals;
5. In order to reduce a possible social desirability effect, future evaluation research should involve outside researchers rather than depend on program staff for pre-test and post-test interviews;
6. Future evaluations -- combined with the current evaluation – will increase the sample size of youth who have completed the RYC program. Larger sample sizes will enable multivariate analyses that will help determine whether the RYC program is more effective for some types of youth than others;
7. Future research should explore whether the RYC program, and other diversion initiatives, can help to reduce the over-representation of racial minorities in the youth justice system;