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# FAST FACTS

**February 8, 2011**

## Reverse the Cuts to Anti-Gang Programs

**R**ecent reports that federal funding for four anti-gang programs in Winnipeg will end in March raise the issue, yet again, of how our tax dollars are being spent. While concerns about street gangs, crime, and violence in Winnipeg’s inner-city continue to mount, the response of the Harper government is taking us in the wrong direction. Rather than building more prisons, we need to support the important work that is ongoing in these communities to address the root causes of these problems.

Our research has shown that community-based solutions are working. These are solutions that inner-city people themselves have developed, drawing upon their hard-earned practical experience. But adequate funding for such initiatives is a major problem. In addition, most funding is project-based, so that programs come and go with frequency, and community workers spend inordinate amounts of time applying for, accounting for, and reporting on a bewildering myriad of funding sources. It is, in every respect, an inefficient way to finance programs from which we all benefit. This was a major finding of a 2010 study on inner-city youth-serving agencies published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives–Manitoba (CCPA–MB). The agencies do good work; young people benefit; but the funding mechanisms are flawed.

But even more than this, what we have learned from our research with inner-city street gang members is that “if you want to change violence in the ‘hood, you have to change the ‘hood.” You have to change the conditions out of which street gangs inevitably emerge. This includes creating legitimate opportunities for young people by investing in creative educational and job opportunities, and providing young people with the means and social supports that will divert them from lives of crime and violence, and put them on a much more productive path.

In the U.S., a solution similar to the Harper government’s “get tough on crime” approach has been in operation for decades. Vast numbers of people, especially young African-American men, have been imprisoned. The results are truly staggering: it is estimated that one-third of all Black males in the United States will experience state prisons in their lifetimes. But crime and violence persist. Imprisonment doesn’t solve the problems.

Our research confirms the futility of imprisonment as a means of solving problems of crime and violence. The street gang members we have interviewed were emphatic in saying that, while they accept that they have to go to prison when they break the law, putting ever-growing numbers of them in prison will not solve the violence in the inner city. It is more likely to add



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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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to that violence. One of the men pointed out the irony and the futility of imprisonment as the core element of an anti-gang strategy: “They put us in a society [prison] where violence is prevalent and tell us not to be violent.” The fact is that prisons are violent places in which street gangs have great success in recruiting new members and making new “business” contacts.

Despite this, and despite the fact that Canada’s prison ombudsman has described the climate in federal prisons as “increasingly harsh, tense and stressed,” the Harper government is building more prisons. In a recent CCPA–MB paper, researcher and former criminal lawyer Paula Mallea reports that 13 new federal prisons are now in various stages of development. The capital budget for the federal penitentiary system is projected to more than double from 2009/10 to 2011/12. Scarce dollars will be spent to lock up still more young people from low-income neighbourhoods, at a current cost of \$147,467 per year per federal prisoner. This strategy makes no sense, especially when you consider that one inner-city program that provides employment with training and cultural learning to former gang members costs \$54,548 per year per participant (including the participant’s wages).

The better and safer alternative is to use those dollars to reverse the cuts to anti-gang programs. Unless that is done, it is likely that some of the young men and women who would have benefited from the continuation of these anti-gang programs will soon return to or embark upon lives of crime and violence, and will end up in prison, where they will cost much more than the preventive programs that will have been cut, and where they will make additional contacts that will further fuel their criminal activities.

Some people ought to be put in prison, because the rest of us need to be protected from them. But the best protection comes from prevention, and prevention requires investments in solutions that

work in changing the underlying conditions that produce the problems of street gangs, crime, and violence.

The Harper government is going down a simplistic and dangerous path by cutting funds to anti-gang programs, and even more, by failing to invest in more constructive alternatives. Far from cutting anti-gang programs, we should be investing heavily in safer and healthier futures for all of us by promoting the creative educational and employment initiatives that will open up different paths for our young people.

So if we want to change violence in the ‘hood, we have to change the ‘hood. Like so many things in life, that is best done by investing in the future of our young people.

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The authors also produced the report, *If You Want to Change Violence in the Hood, You Have to Change the Hood*, published by the CCPA-MB in 2009 and available at [www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca).



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