

What keeps young immigrant adults in Regent Park out of gang and drug-related activity?

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What you need to know

Regent Park in downtown Toronto is Canada's largest and oldest social housing project. It has reached national fame as one of the most disadvantaged communities. In many ways, however, it is fairly typical of social housing developments across the country. Between 68-76% of the "old" Regent Park's residents (those who lived there before neighbourhood revitalization began in 2005) live below the low-income cut-off. Compare that number with Toronto's citywide average of 20%. In this context, it is important to understand what might keep young immigrant adults and next generation communities in Regent Park "out of trouble" and away from gang and drug-related activity.

What is this research about?

This research originally intended to explore first, 1.5 (those who immigrate before or during their early teens), and second-generation immigrants in Regent Park and what may expose them to (or buffer them from) involvement in gang and drug-related activity. This topic has found itself in much recent public and political concern. However, as the study progressed, researchers heard young immigrants stress the central importance of the ongoing neighbourhood revitalization in their lives. The changes appear to be significantly impacting the things that used to buffer them from gang and drug-related activity. Due to this unexpected development, the research shifted to some extent and placed more focus on the effects of the revitalization than was initially intended.



Unexpected to the researchers, the revitalization of Regent Park neighbourhood was a core concern for immigrant and second generation youth interviewed about crime and gang activity.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers sought to better understand the factors that young adults in Regent Park perceive as protecting them from crime as well as steering them away from criminal activity themselves. Given the exploratory nature of this research, the aim was to capture 'protective factors' that bolstered resiliency among young adults in Regent Park on a number of different levels of analysis. The notion of 'resilience' was conceptualized broadly being the result of a combination of factors at the individual, family, peer-group and neighbourhood levels.

Community-based researchers living in the neighbourhood and with strong local ties carried out 40 in-depth 60-90 minute interviews with residents between 16-25 years old. 20 males and 20 females from various ethnic backgrounds took part. Participants included both "street-involved" youth and those who had little or no experience "getting into trouble." Each was asked the same set of 30 open-ended interview questions. This design allowed interview participants to decide for themselves what meaning they wanted to attribute to different aspects of their replies and eased the tension in the interview process. The questionnaire was designed to tap into the notion of 'protective

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factors' in respondents' lives – or in other words, the individual, peer, family, organizational, and/or community-level factors that youth felt kept them out of trouble.

What did the researchers find?

Two consistent themes emerged in this study. First, the young adults interviewed consistently reported that their social networks (largely and often almost exclusively embedded in Regent Park) as well as the tight-knit nature of the community offer protection against involvement in gang and drug-related activities. For them, Regent Park had long been characterized by high levels of mutual trust. They believed that the neighbourhood was protected from crime and violence through the willingness of residents to intervene on behalf of the common good, or what some might call “collective efficacy.”

The second unexpected key theme that emerged was about the ongoing revitalization of the neighbourhood. The revitalization happening in Regent Park is perceived to be diminishing the once high levels collective efficacy and affecting their networks and mechanisms that used to keep them “out of trouble.” This is prompting a fear among many that levels of crime and violence in Regent Park (as well as in other affected neighbourhoods) will increase. In particular, they were concerned about the risk of victimization when being displaced into other neighbourhoods while waiting for new housing in Regent Park.

How can you use this research?

This research has sparked a lot of interest in the neighbourhood itself. The researchers are now part of several working groups in Regent Park that consider the consequences of the ongoing revitalization activities on youth in the neighbourhood and in which ways negative consequences could be curtailed. They are also in conversation with several agencies who have a stake in planned revitalizations in the city of Toronto such as the Daniels Corporation, a

residential high-rise builder, and Toronto Community Housing.

Revitalization projects in low-income communities need to consider the implications of how they carry out their work for vulnerable residents. Involving the community in the process and taking into account the risks of displacement during construction are important planning factors. In particular, the situation and the needs of youth residing in Regent Park and in other social housing projects across Canada need to be placed at the forefront of neighbourhood revitalization project planning.

About the researchers

Project title: *Gang membership among immigrant young adults: Risk and protective factors across different generations*

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