



See Us for Who We Really Are

An Appreciative Inquiry into the Experiences of Youth
Incarcerated in the Manitoba Youth Centre

**MANITOBA
OMBUDSMAN**

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“You got to remember, just because we are criminals, that doesn’t mean that that’s what is in our heart. There is always a reason for a reaction. You know some of us have been through some really rough times, been through a lot of shit, and that is the only way we can bring it out is by doing stupid stuff, releasing the anger. See us for what we really are. A lot of us are just screaming out for help you know? We want help and that’s the way we think we can get it, maybe then they will recognize us.”



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What is Appreciative Inquiry (AI)?

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a methodology based on the assumption that organizations can make positive change by discovering and understanding their strengths and successes.

AI believes that an organization looking for its own weaknesses and problems will keep finding more of the same, but an organization which tries to appreciate its best attributes will continue to unearth more and more of what is good.

The basic idea of AI is to build organizations around what works, and to celebrate successes and expand on them rather than solely focusing on trying to fix problems.

Appreciative Inquiry is a method of research that:

- is based on the science of Positive Psychology
- facilitates positive change in organizations
- builds on strengths, rather than focusing on faults and weaknesses
- takes time to talk to people about their experiences
- is qualitative
- uses probing questions that allow for flexibility and answers that are not the same in each interview
- provides detail about why a particular experience was positive and meaningful
- seeks to create more of the exceptional performance that is already occurring
- focuses on what is the best in the organization

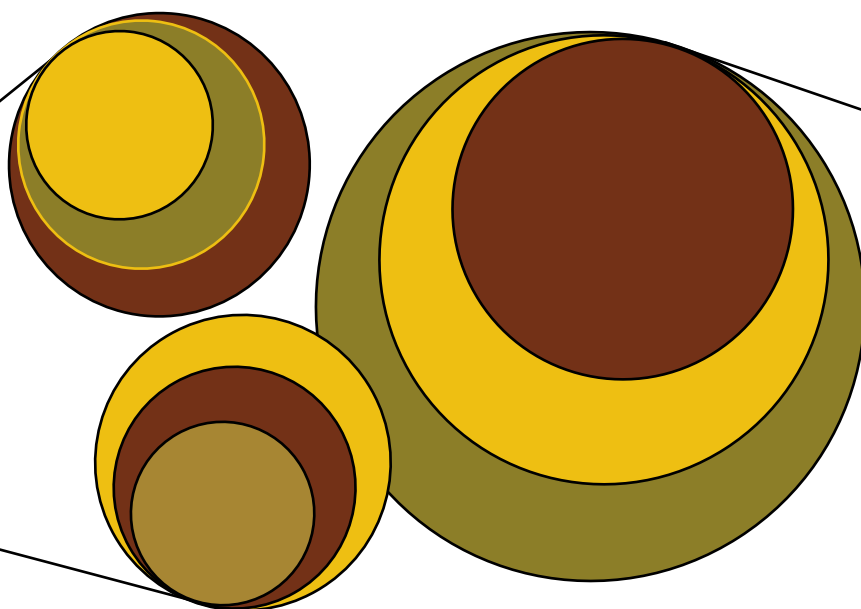
For more information, see the Appreciative Inquiry website, <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>



The Manitoba Youth Center Appreciative Inquiry

One of the primary assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry is that encouraging people to speak about their most positive and meaningful experiences will lead to further discovery and development of an organization's best attributes.

The AI that we developed was designed to encourage youth to tell us what they felt was working at MYC. By asking youth to talk in detail about what had led to their most positive and meaningful experiences at MYC, we were able to identify the centre's strengths and achievements. Although we have analyzed, interpreted, and organized the interview data, it is clear to us that the youth interviewed had definite ideas about what they considered to be MYC's best attributes. They also understood the factors that contribute to the centre's successes. The consistency and depth of their feedback repeatedly demonstrated that they possessed a great deal of insight about what was helpful to them, and understood the factors necessary for their continued growth and progress. The simplicity of their message about MYC was also evident. They appreciate the devoted staff members that care about them; the healthy environment provided by the centre; and programs that work to change their thoughts and behaviours. We hope that we have remained true to this message in the writing of this report.





Demographics

Of the 25 youth who participated in the MYC Appreciative Inquiry:

- 13 were male and 12 were female
- they were between 14 and 18 years of age
- 14 were First Nations
- 7 were Métis
- 2 were mixed race
- 1 was Ethiopian
- 1 was Caucasian
- 20 were on remand status
- 5 had been sentenced
- 21 were from urban centres
- 4 were from rural areas
- the average length of time spent at MYC was 9.98 months.

Each youth interviewed was asked eleven questions designed to encourage them to speak about their most positive experiences during their time at MYC. They were made aware that although they may be quoted, they would not be identified in any way. The quotes that are included throughout this report are their own words.

Making a Connection

In hearing the youth speak about their experiences at MYC, it was apparent that they shared a connection with staff that is based upon respect, trust, and understanding. When we asked youth to tell us about a time when they had a positive connection with a staff member, many spoke about the importance of trust, and how it influenced the way in which they interact with staff. Through our conversations, we learned that many staff at MYC has established themselves as honest, caring, and nonjudgmental adults, who understand the importance of this aspect of their connection with youth. It is because of this trust that the youth feel confident and secure enough to reach out for help when they need it, and why they benefit from the support and guidance provided by staff.

"I got comfortable with her, and I felt like I could open up with her. She was there to listen I guess."

"I just got close to the staff in here and started trusting them, and they always helped me a lot to do good on the outs."

"She just knows what I am talking about; she knows where I am coming from. She doesn't judge me or tell me that I am wrong about what I am thinking."

"Just the staff, they are there to support you like when you need someone to talk to... I had no one to talk to, so I talked to (staff member), and she helped me through it. I had someone I could talk to about it, someone I could trust, like with my personal issue."

"I felt like I could trust him. He always made time to talk to me."

When we asked youth to tell us what they liked best about staff at MYC, their responses revealed how much they valued the emotional support that they provided. Many youth said how important it was that staff took time each day to sit down and talk to them. They found these one-on-one conversations particularly beneficial.

In explaining why they felt that staff were so supportive, several youth pointed out that they were tuned into their emotional state, and were always available to respond to their needs in a meaningful way. Their comments spoke to the compassion and empathy displayed by staff, as well as their commitment to the emotional well-being of the youth in their care.

"I guess knowing that there is someone there to talk to, someone I can have every day and talk to everyday, help me with my problems and get my mind off of stuff."

"We have really understanding staff and I don't know if some of the girls are going to have that when they get out, like you have lots of support here. When you are in here you always have someone to talk to. Someone is always there."

"When I am on SUH (High suicide risk), I will talk to them and then they will make me laugh and smile, and I will get lowered to medium or low risk. They make me feel better because they will actually make sense about what they are talking about. They think about it. They will be like once you're gone, there is no more you, and it makes me realize that killing myself is not the right way to go."

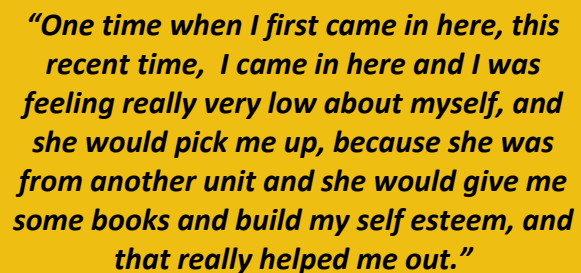
"Usually any time I need to talk she is always available. When things get bad for me, we will go sit and have a conversation."

In addition to attending to their emotional needs, many youth also talked about how much they were affected by simple acts of kindness and caring on the part of staff. Many of the examples that they cited were not things that required a lot of money or effort, they simply demonstrated kindness and thoughtfulness on the part of the staff.


The youth expressed just how far actions such as bringing them a book, sharing a home cooked meal, making a phone call on their behalf, or bringing in a birthday cake went in helping to normalize their incarceration- and making them feel valued and nurtured. Of note, many of the acts of kindness and caring for which youth expressed gratitude, are the same types of things that loving parents do for their children every day.



"When my Mom didn't come for a visit for a month, they contacted my Mom and told her that I was doing bad, so now she comes to see me regularly. I have heard that staff does this for other people as well."



"One time when I first came in here, this recent time, I came in here and I was feeling really very low about myself, and she would pick me up, because she was from another unit and she would give me some books and build my self esteem, and that really helped me out."



"We had a birthday party for one of the girls here. We ate cake and sang her Happy Birthday and played games... We go on campus and like run around and we play soccer and stuff. We still celebrate."

Underlying everything that youth said about staff at MYC was the message that they valued spending quality time with caring, nurturing adults. Many of the youth that we spoke to mentioned how much they cherished simple activities with staff such as going for a walk, having a conversation, watching TV, and playing sports. They talked about how important it was for them to feel liked and accepted by staff, and said that they appreciated when staff put effort into really getting to know them. It was clear that the connections that youth shared with staff helped shape their outlook and affected their self esteem in a positive way.

"When we play hockey or basketball or hangout or talk. Sometimes we go to caf. (cafeteria) and get some juice or coffee."

"Probably almost every day I will sit beside the desk and talk with staff 'cause me and a lot of the staff are good with each other, so we will sit there and talk about this and that. Some staff will give you a little extra, take you for walks and stuff like that."

"She makes the day better because she lets me come chill. It is a good day when she comes in; it makes me less mad."

"That guy would play basketball with us. He's cool."

"They get to know us and they see us for who we actually are, not the crimes we did. They get to know us, why we are like that, find out our problems."

During our interviews with youth, many talked at length about the respect and admiration that they had for staff, and it became apparent that a mentoring and role modelling connection was present. Some of the youth seemed to recognize themselves in the life stories of staff, because they had overcome adversities and challenges similar to their own. Many talked about being inspired to do the same, and said that hearing staff speak about their successes had given them renewed hope for their own futures.

"Some of the staff talk to me about certain things. Some of the things staff say have influenced what I have chosen to do."

"That they are a part of changing me, to know that they are a part of my life, to help changing me to be a better person."

"Being a young mom and there was another staff here that had a baby when she was 15 too. I was 15 at the time, so she kind of related to that type of stuff like how hard it is cause it was hard for me too 'cause I was in here. I don't know, it just felt awkward because I knew I was so young. I didn't want to have a baby but I didn't find out I was pregnant until I was 3 ½, 4 months, so she kind of related, it helped though, cause I didn't feel so alone you know. Like she told me what she had to do and how she was looking to her child's future, and she finished school and everything, and did lots of programs and that's what I am doing right now too. She grew up not so good either, but turned it around and now she has a better lifestyle."

"She is the best female staff here. She has been through a lot of stuff we have been through... Like she got through it and she is successful now. She has a family now, she is married and has kids, like she can relate to all our problems, and she can tell us when we went wrong and how to fix it, and like how to get out and be successful."

"Staff encourage me not to come back and to do good. The staff already do that 'cause they really talk to you and it makes me think of what I am going to do when I get out, so I have to come up with a answer."



Time for Reflection

During interviews we asked youth to explain how their time at MYC had helped them to grow and change, and their responses spoke to the substantial progress that many of them have made. One of the factors that the youth attributed to their growth and maturity was having increased opportunities for meaningful thought and reflection. Many spoke about using the quiet time in their rooms to think about their past choices and behaviours. Some youth said that they were experiencing remorse and regret over their actions, and talked about the value of acknowledging and dealing with their feelings and the effect that this has had on their ability to heal. Many spoke about undergoing a change in attitude, behaviour, and outlook as a result of being held accountable for their actions, and said that they were different people now than when they arrived at MYC. They talked about a change in perspective that has taken them from an egocentric view of the world, to one that respects the rights and feelings of others, and acknowledges their own responsibility for personal choices.

“Just all the programs got me thinking about like remorse and all that stuff and actually like digging underneath the feelings and why I was feeling that way and stuff.”

“ I have realized that as I get older this is not a place I want to be. I want to better myself and help all the younger girls who are in here.”

“I look at things in a different angle; look at things from their side of the story. Instead of reacting to it right away, I stop and think about the consequences with what I do.

“It was a choice I decided to make. I have grown out of trying to be a gangster and thought about my future.”

Several of the youth that we spoke to said that they did not wish to return to their criminal lifestyle. Many said that they had come to realize that the benefits of continuing their criminal behaviour were no longer worth the associated costs and risks. Others said that having children has motivated them to establish the conditions necessary for a productive life. Some also said that they have begun to think about what they really value, and how they would like to develop their own potential in a positive way.

"You know you sit in here thinking a lot, and you start to realize that whatever you are doing is not worth it. It is just wasting your time."

"I dropped out of my gang while I was here and I was jumped by four guys and, I just don't want that lifestyle anymore."

"You are cut off from a lot of things that you are used to. It just gives me a different look at things. What I did wasn't really worth it to be in here, and that I would rather be out with my family instead."

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life in and out of jail. My dad is in and out of jail, my mom is caught up in her own addictions, and I don't want to be. I am trying to break the cycle. I am doing it slowly and this place is helping me lots."

"(I) realize how important my family is, how important my son is, how important my girl is. I just gotta be a man, provide for my family and quit being so selfish. Not cause trouble, because it doesn't just hurt me, it hurts my family too. I am just starting to realize that. It helps me get through this, and I can't wait till I get out. I'll be the father that I am supposed to be, be the guy my girl wants, so I can provide for them instead of going out drinking and doing stupid crap."



Basic Needs

One of the interview questions asked youth to share a story about a positive experience they had at MYC. In their responses, several youth said they appreciated the structured and stable

"I feel secure, like you don't have to watch your back all the time. We get three meals a day."

environment at the centre because it made them feel safe. Many youth also said that they felt protected from physical harm at MYC, and were secure in the knowledge that their basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter would be met.

As Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs suggests, feeling safe and having shelter, food, and clothing are essential factors that need to be present for other growth and development to occur. Although many of us take having these basic needs met for granted, the youth that we spoke to did not. For some, their lives and circumstances prior to their arrival at MYC did not provide them with these things, and they were grateful that these needs were now being met.

"It is just so structured here and safe you know? You don't have to worry about starving, not having clean clothes, 'cause it is all here for you, you know?"

"I am healthier, a lot healthier. This place helped me to grow too. I have been here not even a year and when I got here I was only 5'3; now I'm 5'7. it is all the sleeping and the milk, plus the food."



Consistency

In addition to feeling safe and secure, it was evident that youth at MYC had benefitted from the centre's structured environment in other ways as well. Many of them said that although it was very different from what they were accustomed to, they liked having rules and boundaries, and being held accountable for their actions.

They talked about the progress and changes that they had made during their time at MYC and credited consistency and staff modelling for their success. They said that these factors had encouraged them to re-evaluate their own behaviour and its effect on the people around them. When they were probed further about what this meant, several youth said that they were being polite and respectful in their interactions with others, and had begun to use their newly acquired manners in day to day interactions with staff and peers.

"It made me realize that just think of the things that I can change, and the things I can't, like in here 'cause there are lots of rules in here, but in my house there are no rules, so I am trying to follow the rules, my manners. Treating my mom (well) because I treat her bad, but I treat the staff in here good, so why can't I treat her good?"

"My attitude, when I came in here I was telling people to FO and shit, then now I'm here and I am well behaved. I always use my manners anytime I ask for something. When I get out, I know I am going to be like that still."

"Like they wait for you to use your manners and (if) you need something, you have to use your manners. People start doing it. You just get into the hang of it."

"I know it sounds kind of strange but I kind of like this place 'cause I have never had this kind of structure before, and I am happy with myself and where I am at right now. There are a lot of staff around here that are consistent in what they say and how they do things, and I like that some of them are very structured. Like I don't know how to explain it, we have really good staff here, yeah, we do."

"The staff in here treat me in a good way, so I might as well respect them you know? They respect me."




A New Perspective on Education

When youth were asked to talk about a time at MYC when they felt really good about themselves, many talked about their positive experiences at school. Some of the youth said that for the first time in their lives they were consistently attending classes and achieving academic success. They also spoke about how success at school had resulted in increased self confidence and improved self esteem.

Many of the youth were keenly aware of the positive effects of smaller class sizes, individualized curriculum design, and increased support on their academic growth, and they identified the hard work, encouragement, and individualized attention of MYC's teachers as contributing factors to their success. They expressed great pride over their recent achievements at school and a newly acquired optimism about their own academic abilities.

When we examined what the youth said about school at MYC, it became clear that they are not only regularly attending school and earning credits, but they have internalized a very important message about the value of education. They have learned that the choices they make now will affect their futures, and that pursuing post-secondary education will open doors for them that may have otherwise remained closed



"Well I am half a credit away from graduating as a mature student so my teacher, he is very good, so yeah, I just feel really proud of myself that I never ever thought I would make it this far..."

"When I got some credits from school, my first credit, I was pretty pleased."

"I have a lot of goals and I have almost accomplished one of my goals; that's to finish grade 12, so after that I am going to be taking courses in Early Childhood Education. (Where?) Red River... but I would really like to do law. I am really interested in that and I think that I would make a good lawyer."

"I got some school work done. I never had no credits or nothing on the outs. Now I am working on my fourth (credit)."

"I go to school every day. It encourages me to go to school 'cause when I was on the outs, I never went to school and now I know how important education is just to get places in life, to get a good job. It's better than sitting at home doing nothing all day."



Behavioural Standards Program

In addition to feeling really good about themselves at school, several youth spoke about how the Behavioural Standards Program had helped to improve their confidence. Every youth that comes to MYC is required to participate in this program, and some of its expectations include following directions and rules, being respectful and polite with staff and peers, practising good personal hygiene, staying positive, working hard at school, and using free time responsibly. The program is comprised of four behavioural levels that are referred to as Orientation, Respect, Honesty, and Trust. All youth start at Orientation level when they arrive at MYC, but they are given the opportunity to work with staff to achieve their Trust level by setting goals designed to promote success in their cottage, at school, and in the community.

A daily evaluation of their behaviour at school and in their cottage comprises the Daily Progress Report, and this report determines whether or not they will progress to a higher level, stay at their current level, or regress to a lower level.

Many youth said that participating in the Behavioural Standards Program at MYC was a very positive experience, and they expressed pride and a sense of accomplishment in obtaining their Trust level. More importantly, their comments revealed how much they have benefitted from the increased self esteem, positive reinforcement, and encouragement that the program provides.

“When I made my Trust level, the highest level, just by following staff directions, being nice to peers, going to my room when I am told to, helping out staff without them having to ask me. This is what I think of when I think of a good time here.”

“ I felt good about myself when I got my Trust level. I was actually following the rules, I was respectful, helpful.”

“Getting my Trust level made me feel good, moving up a level, just from being on good behaviour and staying positive.”

“I maintained the highest level in the units special program. (I) got the highest level and I didn't think I could do it, and I got it and it made me feel good.”



Burning Off Steam

During interviews, youth talked about how important physical activity was to them. Beyond the enjoyment that they get from gym time at MYC, it was apparent that they were also experiencing the physical, psychological, and social benefits of increased physical activity. Many youth spoke about making the connection between

“Gym is good. (Why?) Physical activity, if you are stressed out you run hard, let the stress, anger, let it out. Sometimes for me I had anxiety so it helps me get me to sleep at night. I’m tired, I’m not wide awake.”

increased physical activity and improved health.

Some said that

increased exercise at

MYC has positively impacted

their mood and sleep patterns, while others noticed a reduction in their stress levels and anxiety.

One female youth said that increased physical activity has resulted in an improved body image, and others stated that participating in gym has given them an opportunity to release their anger in a constructive way, and to build on their communication and team work skills.

In listening to the reasons that they give for liking gym so much, it became evident that these youth have learned that physical exercise is a positive coping mechanism and they clearly

“You express your anger in gym.”

“For me, it helps to relieve stress and gets me thinking about playing a game instead of I should be on the outs. It gets my mind off things and it helps you cope with, kind of like gets you more contact with other people, and it helps to communicate with people a bit more you know? That kind of helps a lot too; at least it does for me.”

understand its role in achieving overall physical and emotional well being.



A Different Kind of High

When we asked youth to identify the programs that they found most helpful, many spoke about the substance abuse programs offered at MYC. They were able to articulate why they found the programs beneficial, and shared some of the insights that they had gained about their own addictions and the advantages of sobriety.

A number of substance abuse programs are run at MYC including Youth Substance Abuse Management (YSAM), Alateen, and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). YSAM is a 15 day program based upon a harm reduction model that informs youth about the risks associated with substance abuse. Although one of its objectives is to promote abstinence, it recognizes that an abstinence model is not always effective given the vast body of research defining young people's exploratory behaviour and curiosity around drugs and alcohol. In addition to YSAM, AA meetings are led by recovering volunteer facilitators once a week. Alateen meetings which address issues of co-dependency are also held one a week at MYC.

“AA, cause I can relate to lots of stuff they talk about and what they say in there, it's true stuff, like they talk about inner peace when you are not on stuff, and you know it is all true. I want to be happy when I get out. I don't want to get out and be a miserable person.”

Some youth told us that learning about their own triggers for addictions was helpful, and said that recognizing the risks and ramifications associated with substance abuse was beneficial. Others said that it was useful to learn about how their addictions had impacted family members, as well as how their loved ones' addictions had affected them.

The youth also shared their own insights about the impact their addictions had on their sense of self. They talked about how they had forgotten who they really were when they got involved with alcohol and drugs, and said that the programs at MYC were helping them to rediscover themselves and stay sober.

One key aspect of the programming that many of the youth identified as particularly significant to them was hearing others speak about their struggles with addictions and how they had overcome them. Recognizing that it was possible to stay sober and live a better life seemed to inspire the youth to make their own positive choices about drugs and alcohol.

“Alateen, ‘cause we talk about drugs and alcohol and how it affects you and how it affects your family and what to do better, and maybe that is part of the reason why you are doing what you are doing because maybe you have had a family that was alcoholic, or who were really bad into drugs. (It’s) just like really good to hear about other people’s stories and being able to relate to them.”

“Alateen. You can talk to the counsellors, get stuff off your chest.”

“AFM. All the stuff drugs can do to you and how they can kill you, it helped.”

“Youth Substance Abuse Management (YSAM) and AA. I guess that it tells us how to be aware of our triggers and our behaviour changes, to see how one thing led to another thing, led to another thing, and so on and so on. It was helpful.”

“The one I go to is AA, ‘cause guys are struggling with the same thing I am, and they see who you are, people with experience. It helped out just talking about it.”



Discovering Their Roots

Two of the programs that the youth identified as favourites were the culture room and Kokum (Grandmother). These particular programs focus on Aboriginal culture and spirituality, as a large percentage of the youth at MYC are First Nations and Métis. Female Elders host the Kokum program where youth learn to make moccasins, dream catchers, and star blankets. In the culture room, Elders lead teachings in Aboriginal languages and drumming, and educate youth about the history and significance of ceremonies such as smudges. Powwows are also held annually at MYC.

When youth spoke about the cultural programs at MYC, they expressed how much they valued and appreciated learning about their Aboriginal culture and spirituality. Some of the youth communicated an interest in wanting to discover and celebrate their history and culture as a means of passing the knowledge on to future generations. Others stated that they felt renewed self respect and pride as a result of participating in their traditional ceremonies. They spoke about the fact that they understood that exposure to the teachings and ceremonies of their people had helped them to begin to cultivate their unique cultural identity.

"I like going to the culture room. It is where the staff talks about and teaches lessons about Powwows and language. It is good to know stuff like that. He teaches you stuff about your culture, it is good for me because I am not really involved in my culture, and my grandpa and grandma are really into their culture and I would be the one representing the culture in my family as they go on."

"The cultural program because I like to learn about my culture and to keep it going and it is really interesting to me to know about all the ceremonies. It just feels really good to be in the ceremonies; to know that I am a part of something so special and so sacred."

The Kokum program, you can make moccasins and do smudges."

"Culture is a big thing here too, so I think that getting more in touch with your culture, 'cause we just forget about it when we get involved with alcohol and drugs and stuff, but that is a part of who we as Aboriginal people are, and I think that we need to start getting involved with our culture more."

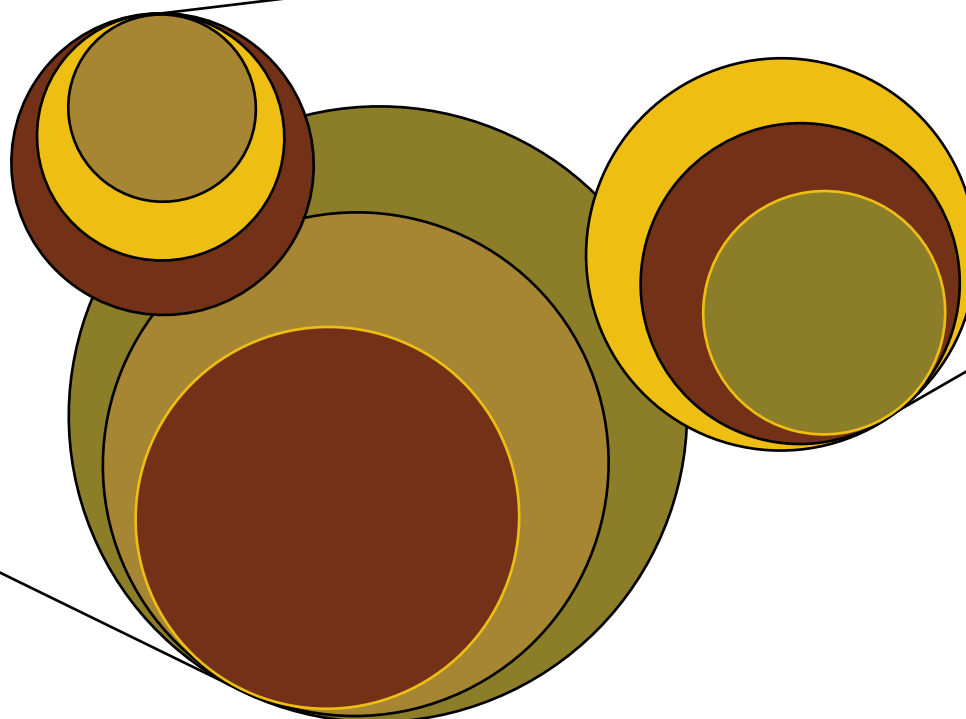


Programming for Success

The various programs offered at MYC are all designed with the same goals in mind; to address criminogenic risk factors, reduce recidivism, and give young people an opportunity to succeed as productive members of the community.

All of the programs at MYC are research based and steeped in best practices, and the majority include a substantial cognitive behavioural component. Although there are assigned facilitators who deliver the various education and intervention programs, the juvenile counsellors in each of the cottages are trained in some of the cognitive behavioural programs, and are encouraged to integrate them into the youths' daily routines.

During our interviews, we asked youth to talk about the positive aspects of the programs and activities offered at MYC. An overwhelming majority stated that the meaningful changes in their thinking patterns and behaviours were a result of participating in the programs offered at MYC.





Aggression Replacement Training (ART)

One of the programs that many youth identified as helpful to them was Aggression Replacement Training. (ART). ART is a cognitive behavioural program that trains youth to cope with their aggressive and violent behaviours through the development of social skills, anger control, and moral reasoning. The program guides youth in building specific skills through role plays, discussions, and individual homework assignments. Here are some of the positive things that youth said about ART:

"The ART program in this cottage here helped me, like every day, talking about avoiding conflicts in here and out there. A lot of us use the program to help us out in here, to avoid conflicts and trouble. It is very useful."

"Those programs helped me with different things. Like the anger management one, I liked it because it helped me express my anger in a different way instead of punching things in my room. It was alright. We would always do these play things, these role plays. I always used to take part in them, so it was kind of fun."

"Art.(why?)' Cause it actually, I had an anger problem, and it is actually helping me how to think better before I act."



Thinking Awareness Group (TAG)

Several of the youth that we interviewed spoke very highly of the TAG program and said that they had gained real benefit from it.

TAG is another cognitive behavioural program offered at MYC that teaches youth to recognize how their thoughts influence and determine their feelings and behaviours. It is a 10 day program that uses non-offence specific scenarios to encourage youth to recognize their own cognitive distortions and misperceptions. Through cognitive restructuring, youth make the connection between their thinking errors and the behaviours that occur as a result of them

“When I was in the Thinking Awareness Group program, it helped with positive thinking and helped me like really understand my thinking choices from my negative choices. It made me feel good to know when I get out, I will be able to know my high risk situations and when I am putting myself at risk. It was a good program.”

“I did this TAG program that helped me. It just shows you how to prevent relapsing and alcohol. (It) helped me stay out for a while. It just taught me to think before I act; how to know high risk situations and avoid it.”

“Thinking Awareness Group. It just teaches you criminal thinking errors, and like how to deal with different situations like peer pressure. I’ve done it three times and have been a mentor for it twice.”



Recommendations – Please Can We Have More

When reviewing what the youth shared about their experiences at MYC, we felt that it was appropriate to use their words as the foundation of the recommendations section of this report. All of the recommendations outlined below are those of the youth, and were based on their responses to the following interview question:

“Imagine that you had a magic wand that could make anything happen and you could use it for three wishes that would make your time, and the time of others in the MYC the best possible experience. What would you wish for?”

More Programming Targeted at Helping Gang Members

Some of the male youth that we spoke to expressed how difficult it was to leave their gang and they wanted more programs to help youth that were presently or previously involved in a gang. They advised that the authenticity and effectiveness of gang programs that involved ex-gang members who drew upon their own experiences in order to help youth was beneficial

“I like when people come here, like ex-gang members and they tell us not to make stupid choices, (they) tell us we will end up not just here, but Stoney Mountain or something, so it’s not at all worth it.”



Increased Cultural Programming

Of the 25 youth that we interviewed, 14 were Aboriginal. They had very positive things to say about the culture room as well as “Kokum” and indicated that they would like to see more cultural programming take place at MYC.

“We could go to a Powwow, like have more spiritual programs in here too. They do here, but it’s not enough.”

“Powwows once a year. They try to do it every year but it depends on how everything is run.”

Addictions Programming

Youth indicated that they wanted increased access to addictions counselling at MYC including having support from someone 24 hours a day, similar to an AA sponsor. They also said that they would like increased support and accountability related to their addictions after release.

“Not really like AA. One that helps deal with addictions, but also like other things, like someone who will help you plan stuff out and help you out on the outs, to help set you up with a plan and help you out, to do that checking up on you.”

“Addictions counselling, like if you are feeling down or feel like doing something stupid, you could just give them a call.”



One-On-One Counselling

Throughout our interviews, youth often spoke about how one-on-one counselling with staff was very beneficial to them. One youth pointed out that she had issues of a very sensitive nature that she did not feel comfortable talking about it in a group setting. She said she had experienced personal growth because of the one-on-one counselling that she had received. She recommended that MYC offer more individual counselling for youth.

“A lot of kids are too ashamed to say what kind of background they are from and stuff like that, so I don’t know, one-on-one with girls here is very good, because it is easier for them to be open and honest, so I think more one-on-one (counselling) activities, not just group. I know when I started to think about changes, it was really hard to sit in a group. I wasn’t able to express myself in front of everybody, so like that’s why I am the person I am right now. It’s because of a lot of one on one.”

More Supports Following Release

Several youth expressed fear of becoming institutionalized because of the time spent at MYC. They said that they had become so comfortable and accustomed to the routine at the centre that they had developed anxiety and apprehension about their release. They talked about a desire for more supports in the community following release that would give them the structure and stability that they need.

“I think there are a lot of supports out there, people to talk to, but when you’re in here, it might seem easy like yeah, when I’m out, I am going to talk to someone. You do it in here, but out there it is hard to get off your feet, and what you have to do to get that help, it’s just hard. I just think there needs to be more people out there, more people to talk to.”

“I just know that I don’t want to be in here but I want to be done school. I need to stay around positive people like the people I hang around with now are very negative, they go out and drink all the time.”



Recommendations – A Vision for the Future

While there were various comments offered by the youth regarding MYC programming that was already in place, there were also suggestions made in relation to specific improvements. In order to ensure that the scope of the youths' input is reflected and in consideration of the specialized focus that Appreciative Inquiry sets out, it was determined that the additional comments falling outside of the guidelines of AI should be reflected independent of the AI report.

As such, we have outlined them here as stand-alone recommendations for consideration.

"I try to go in a program but it is for long term girls, more than 6 months, or sentenced girls, and so I can't go in those programs... but I think they need more programs even for people in short term."

Increased Programming for Youth Serving Short Term Sentences

While the main comments regarding MYC programming were both positive and appreciative in nature, there were more specific suggestions with respect to the differences between remand/short-term sentenced youth versus long-term sentenced youth.

Some of the youth that we spoke to said that because they were at MYC on remand or were serving shorter sentences, they were not eligible to participate in certain programs. There was a strong desire to participate in the same programming being offered to youth serving longer sentences. As such, it was felt that considerations should be given to either expanding current programming to include those who are serving shorter terms or to the creation of programming that specifically addresses the needs/time restrictions of the youth who fall within this category.

Parenting Classes for Youth at MYC

Several of the youth that we interviewed spoke very fondly of their children, but openly discussed the difficulties of becoming parents so young.

"Parenting classes would be good in here too. I have asked and there is none. A lot of these guys have kids."

Although they recognized that their children were providing the motivation to get their lives back on track, they expressed reservations and insecurities about their own child rearing abilities. Many felt that it would be beneficial for parenting programs to be added to the programming structure at MYC. This appeared to come from a genuine place of the youth wanting to learn the skills to assist them in providing a more stable and healthy environment for their children upon release.

In addition to the recommendation for parenting classes, one female youth expressed that considerations could be given to allowing visits to take place in an area consistent with accommodating larger families.

“I want to have a place, like at Edmonton Max (Federal Penitentiary), they have a certain place where you can be with your kid. They have it here too, but the room is too small. How are you supposed to communicate with your kid if you are in this small, squishy room and your kid is running around? Then they get mad at you ‘cause your kid is screaming. You know, have a bigger space for those people who have kids.”

Reflecting on the various comments gathered over the course of the inquiry, it became apparent that those who had experienced becoming a parent, spoke positively on how this had impacted their lives. There seemed to be a commonality of reflection being placed back on their own respective childhoods with consideration and a better understanding of the challenges faced by their parents. This understanding was clearly indicated in the response of one particular female youth who, when asked what one of her three wishes for change at MYC would be, stated:

“For these youth to have better families, these troubled youth that come in here, it’s all because they have no parents and they are in and out of CFS and foster homes and all that. They don’t have a stable placement you know, and when they do have a stable place, they don’t feel safe and they don’t trust them, so they run away. So I think if these youth here at the youth centre had a better up bringing we wouldn’t be where we are right now. We would be able to make better choices...because they need to know things so they can teach their children, so their children don’t grow up like us here.”



Conclusion

Our Appreciative Inquiry into the experiences of youth at the Manitoba Youth Centre has given us a glimpse of the centre from their perspective. For many of these youth, life inside the centre is structured, productive and secure. It provides a quality of life that few seem to have outside of the centre.

The youth we interviewed are smart, hard working individuals who possess great potential. Many take advantage of what the centre offers them and experience pride and joy in completing daily tasks. Many feel they have made major progress with the help of MYC's programs and activities, and that their confidence has grown and transformed them into more self-assured, productive individuals.

Some are just beginning High School while others are graduating. Many have realized that education is an important component for success in life, and are taking steps to complete their diplomas. They are aware that graduating from High School will open doors for them that might otherwise remain closed.

In addition to providing meaningful education, the Manitoba Youth Centre is a place that provides support for youth with diverse backgrounds and life circumstances. The Aboriginal youth at MYC have the opportunity to begin a journey of self-discovery by reconnecting with their culture and passing these teachings on to their children. The centre promotes positive interactions between the youth and staff. The interactions and programs promote respect, honesty, and trust.

One of the themes that repeatedly surfaced during our Appreciative Inquiry was the family backgrounds of the youth at MYC. Many of them have parents who have been, or are currently incarcerated. Many have parents who are not as responsible as we would hope. Through participation in the programs and activities offered at the centre, the youth have come to recognize and understand the cycle of addictions, violence, and imprisonment that some of their families have experienced, and they want it to end. They seem to have a genuine desire to become responsible parents to their children, and contributing members of society.

(I wish that) 'While all the kids were here they used their time wisely, so they could get at least a grade 12 education so they can get a job just in case. A lot of kids come here for stealing 'cause they don't have food or their Mom is not always there. I wish they could change so things would get better for them and they would have money and their parents would stay home.'

Appendix A:

Manitoba Ombudsman: Appreciative Inquiry into the Experiences of Youth Incarcerated in the Manitoba Youth Centre Questionnaire – February 2010

My name is Lori and I would first like to thank you for meeting with me. I am here on behalf of the Manitoba Ombudsman and the University of Winnipeg where I am an honours student with a degree in Criminal Justice.

1. Have you ever heard of the Ombudsman before?
2. Have you ever seen the Ombudsman's Office pamphlets or posters?
3. Have you ever tried to contact the Ombudsman in writing _____ by phone _____?
4. Did you have any problems doing this?

I am here doing a research project to find out about some of the good things that happen at the Manitoba Youth Centre. This type of research is called Appreciative Inquiry. To understand what Appreciative Inquiry is just think of it as a research project that is looking for the things you 'appreciate' or like about the centre.

My questions will be about some of the good things that have happened to you when you were in the Manitoba Youth Centre. I will get all the answers from the residents I interview, analyze them, complete a report and then the Ombudsman's Office will talk to and provide general information to Youth Corrections.

We hope that this information will help corrections staff do more of the good things that you describe.

Consent:

You do not have to answer these questions if you do not want to and you can end this interview at any time.

If there are questions you don't want to answer you may skip those questions.

Your name will not be used in any public report and you will not be identified in any way when we have discussions with the Manitoba Youth Centre or Corrections. We will use quotes in the report but they will not identify you.

We will not identify you but I will have to report the following:

- (1) Abuse disclosures
- (2) Criminal offences
- (3) Any information that you might hurt yourself or someone else.

Remember you can end the interview at anytime.

If you have problems because you talked to me, please contact the Manitoba Ombudsman at this number (provide card). If you have any questions about this interview now or at a later date, you can contact the Manitoba Ombudsman Office.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do you wish to proceed with this interview? (Y _____ / N_____)

Initials: _____

Unit: _____

Date Completed : _____

Resident's First Name: (Optional) _____

Demographic Information:

1. Folder #:

2. Gender: M_____ F_____

3. Age:

4. For our research, would you like to identify yourself as:

First Nations_____ Métis_____ Inuit_____ other _____ or,
rather not say_____

If identifying as Aboriginal, would you like to identify as status or non-status
(circle one).

5. Remand:_____ Sentenced: _____ Time spent in MYC for current
charge/s: _____

6. #of times sent to youth correctional facilities:_____

of times sentenced:_____

7. Total time spent in MYC:_____

8. Anything else you would like me to know about yourself:

Theme One: *General feelings about the Manitoba Youth Centre as experienced by
youth incarcerated within the facility*

Question One: During your time in the MYC, you probably have had some good
times and some not so good times. I would like you to think back to one of the
good times.

Can you tell me about it?

*Prompt: It might be a particularly good day or week or a time when you felt that
things were going really well. It might be a talk you have had with a staff person - a
time when you felt good or happy.*

Theme Two: *Staff-inmate relationships inside the MYC*

Question Two: Can you tell me about a time when you had a positive connection
with a staff member?

What made this connection special?

Question Three: Can you tell me about some of the good staff at the MYC?

Theme Three: *Positive feelings toward self*

Question Four: I would like you to think back to a time when you were in the MYC
and felt really good about yourself.

Can you tell me about it?

Can you tell me why you think that happened?

Theme Four: *Personal growth while in the MYC*

Question Five: People grow and change all the time. How has your time in the MYC helped you to grow or change?

Prompt: Maybe a program offered here gave you something that you will take with you when you are (or were previously released)? Maybe it was something that you have accomplished for yourself?

Theme Five: *Feelings about educational programs within the MYC*

Question Six: I understand that part of the programs offered at MYC include educational activities. Can you tell me about your favourite program/s that you take here at the MYC?

Why are they your favourite?

Question Seven: Now I would like you to think deeper and tell me about an educational program or activity that you have found particularly helpful. Can you tell me why?

Question Eight: Have you thought about what you would like to be doing in 10 years? What do you think would be needed for you to get there?

Theme Six: *The 'magic wand' question was designed to explore what youth would change if they could. This question can also be used to find out about the problems within the system based on what they would like to see changed.*

Question Nine: Imagine that you had a magic wand that could make anything happen and you could use it for three wishes that would make your time and the time of others in the MYC, the best possible experience. What would you wish for?

Theme Seven: *What the youth in the MYC would like others to know*

Question Ten: There are lots of people in Corrections and the community that are trying to help you.

Is there anything that you would like them to know?

What can those who really care and want to help youth to make a positive difference?

Is there anything that you would like the people who read this information to know about living in this facility?

Question Eleven: If you were in my position, are there any other questions would you ask in this interview?

Closure

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions.

The information you have provided is valuable and will be helpful in our discussions with Corrections.

If you do have any problems because you talked to me, please contact the Manitoba Ombudsman. If you have any questions about this interview or about the Ombudsman Office now or at a later date, you can contact Kerissa at the Manitoba Ombudsman Office.

The questionnaire is now complete. Thank you again for your time helping me with these questions. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

Manitoba Ombudsman

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