



LINK – LINKing Refugee Youth and Families to Positive Social Supports

Introduction

LINKing Refugee Youth and Families to Positive Social Supports (LINK) is an innovative program designed to prevent the involvement of refugee youth in criminal and gang-related activity.

The National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) defines innovative as prevention programs that test new approaches, theories and interventions with at-risk populations. They are based on a strong theoretical framework that links the proposed intervention to the risk factor(s), target population and desired outcomes. Innovative projects verify changes through limited research design and require causal confirmation using appropriate experimental techniques. These programs are recognized and encouraged with the caution that they be carefully evaluated.¹

Public Safety Canada's National Crime Prevention Strategy provided funding to implement the LINK pilot project in Winnipeg, Manitoba between September 2009 and March 2013. LINK was implemented by the Newcomers Employment and Education Development Services (N.E.E.D.S.) Inc. and assisted 229 youth.

Participants

LINK participants were referred to N.E.E.D.S. by the Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council, Winnipeg's largest settlement agency, through their "Welcome Place" temporary housing residence. Referrals were made within two weeks of arrival in Canada.

Youth referred to the program underwent an assessment of risk and those who participated in the program were between 12 and 18 years and were deemed at risk of involvement in gang activity due to factors such as:

- Past experiences of trauma and violence;
- Interaction with delinquent peers causing "street socialization" – learning about life in Canada through interaction with delinquent peers;
- Poor parental supervision;
- Educational frustration and low attachment to school.

Among the youth accepted into the LINK project, those assessed at the highest risk were identified and provided with additional components of intensive programming, as described below.

All the participants had Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) status, 47% had prior exposure to trauma and violence and, according to self-reports, none of them had a prior record of offending. The LINK program engaged both male and female youth, with 119 female and 110 male clients making up the total in the pilot project. Thirty-five of the participants fell in the highest risk category. Although GAR youth are accepted from various countries around the world, the majority of the LINK participants came from Congo, Bhutan, Somalia, Iraq, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan.

Key Elements of the Program

The LINK program has six components provided over one year. All participants received the first four components while those assessed at the highest risk received all the components and had their families involved.

1. *Education on Canadian Society* – each client participated in 60 hours of workshops designed to provide information on Canada and to help reduce isolation and increase success at school, home and with peers.

¹Promising and Model Crime Prevention Programs - Volume I, 2008

2. *Mentorship* – participants received 72 hours of one-on-one or group-based mentoring designed to introduce them to community resources, provide social and emotional support and supervision, and provide positive adult role models for youth.
3. *Educational Support* to increase chances of success in school – Activities included LINK staff liaison with teachers and administrative school staff, in-school visits to provide support, advice, and cultural information.
4. *Recreational Activities* – designed to decrease isolation and loneliness and increase the development of positive peer relationships.
5. *Family mentorship* – designed to provide opportunities to strengthen parent-child bonds and reduce the risk of developing intergenerational cultural conflict. LINK matched families of higher risk participants with Canadian families. The families met on a regular basis to attend workshops and activities.
6. *Referrals* – Many of the refugee families participating in LINK had experienced severe trauma before arrival in Canada. Referrals to counseling and mental health services, cultural associations, housing, employment, and education supports were important aspects of the LINK project.

Staffing

Three full-time staff (one Coordinator, one Curriculum Facilitator, and one Mentorship Facilitator) and two part-time (20 hour/week) support employees implemented the LINK program.

Staff were required to have:

- Knowledge about crime, the justice system, and issues related to the refugee population's integration into Canadian society;
- Personal experiences in working with refugees;
- Knowledge of the culture and languages of the clients in order to feel comfortable expressing themselves.

Fifty percent (50%) of LINK employees had non-Canadian (African) origins and, on average, were fluent in three languages.

Monthly training for staff was provided on issues such as legal boundaries for working with children and youth and strategies to help young newcomers integrate.

One hundred and eight (108) volunteers were involved in the LINK project and interpreters were hired when needed to help run the activities.

All mentors had to undergo screening through a Criminal Record Check as well as a Child Abuse Registry Check to ensure they were a proper fit for the program, and a Mentorship Training Manual was developed (33 training sessions took place, with an average of five mentors in each session).

Partnerships

LINK relied on many partners including:

- Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council (Welcome Place): referred youth to the LINK program, provided initial interpretation for families, and provided information regarding arrivals and move dates of GAR families;
- MOMENTA: provided mentorship for four Winnipeg School Divisions; liaised with N.E.E.D.S. to help better meet the needs of refugee youth within the Canadian education system and provided attendance information for evaluation purposes;
- Winnipeg Police Services: provided presentations for youth on gang prevention, safety, and the role of Police in Winnipeg;
- Aurora Family Therapy Program for Immigrant and Refugee Families, Elizabeth Hill Counselling Centre, and Mount Carmel Clinic Multicultural Wellness Program: provided mental health counseling to refugee families if needed;
- YMCA and YWCA of Winnipeg: provided free six-month memberships to newly arrived refugee youth and their families and provided safe spaces for recreational activities;
- The Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM House), the Graffiti Art Gallery and Boys & Girls Club of Winnipeg: provided additional program support for youth participants in the community;
- Winnipeg Fire and Paramedic Services: provided tours for youth to educate participants about the fire and paramedic system in Canada;

- African Community Organizations of Manitoba Inc. (ACOMI): accepted referrals from the LINK program regarding information about cultural associations in Manitoba.

Findings

- The LINK pilot project underwent a process evaluation. Overall, the LINK project was implemented as intended.
- The program reached 95% of the total number it hoped to serve, and was successful in reaching those high-risk refugee youth and families it intended.
- The program had a retention rate of 98%, with the majority of youth and families staying active in the project for the full year of their involvement.
- A total of 436 school visits were conducted, with an average of 12 visits per month.
- 26 recreational family gatherings were implemented, while 12 were originally expected.

Implementation Observations

- Appropriate systems and procedures for recruiting, screening, training and supporting mentors must be in place before beginning to work with participants.
- One-on-one mentorship, whether for individuals or families, is difficult to sustain. Providing site-based mentoring, where participants gather together, is more feasible. It is more easily monitored, requires less administrative work, is more efficient in terms of mentors/mentees ratio, and is more appropriate for certain cultural backgrounds.
- Recruiting mentors requires time and cost. Effective strategies for using electronic and social media need to be explored.
- The ability to provide a flexible and culturally sensitive service was very important. Many refugee families feel overwhelmed and helpless at first, and if there are not people with the capacity to understand different views and cultures, and communicate in a wide variety of languages, difficulties within families can emerge quickly. LINK staff maintained frequent and meaningful contact with participant families.
- Different systems and contacts within the broader education sector can be challenging to navigate. To reduce these difficulties, LINK staff became members of the Safe Schools Manitoba Network, where

representatives from all parts of the education sector met for discussions and action. Project staff also created monthly contact sheets to use while conducting school visits to keep track of school personnel involved in the lives of the LINK youth. LINK staff worked to identify any special needs of LINK youth and to ensure they were registered in programs that met their learning needs.

- To keep participants actively engaged, services must address the actual needs of the participants in ways that respect their levels of knowledge about life in Canada. Grouping participants based on their maturity levels and age was useful in this context.
- Recreational activities proved to be a key component to help youth feel engaged, learn how to react, exchange, share things, and build a sense of community.
- The participants assessed as “high risk” required more support than was originally thought and often experienced conflict with their parents/guardians. This created challenges for LINK staff as they provided support for youth who were struggling while, at the same time, attending to the other participants in the program. Services for high-needs participants were limited and, in some cases, even if appropriate referrals were available, LINK clients were hesitant to access services from organizations they did not know.

Cost

The total cost of implementing the LINK project was \$2,234,949 (53% funded by the NCPC).

The main in-kind contributions came from the Newcomers Education and Employment Development Services Inc. (N.E.E.D.S), the Province of Manitoba, Winnipeg Harvest, and Momenta.

Additional financial contributions were provided by the Child Nutrition Council of Manitoba (CNCM).

Sustainability

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) has fully adopted the LINK program and will be providing funding for at least the next two years.

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For more information or to receive a copy of the final evaluation report, please contact the National Crime Prevention Centre by e-mail at prevention@ps-sp.gc.ca

If you wish to register for the NCPC mailing list to receive information from the Centre, please visit the subscription page at: <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/bt/mlng-lst-eng.aspx>.