

PLEA's Career Path Program

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT – September, 2012

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BRIEF PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

PLEA's Career Path program aims to provide meaningful employment and mentorship to males and females, ages 15 to 18, who are at high risk of gang involvement. Referrals are through youth probation officers. The program involves a 10-week job placement, intensive one-to-one support and supervision, and employer mentoring with a variety of training and educational opportunities. The goals are to increase youth participants' ability to function in work and community environments, to enhance their future job prospects, and reduce their risk of gang involvement.

Youth can start working at their job placements immediately after intake to within five months after intake. Youth who begin their job placements immediately typically meet with Career Path staff to discuss the program, do a needs assessment, and complete intake surveys. When there is a lag between intake and the start of a job placement, youth also take part in First Aid training and have the opportunity to enhance their work-related skills (e.g., resume writing, interviewing, job searches) that are outlined in the Career Path Employment Manual. This manual covers marketable skills and attributes for assisting youth in finding and maintaining a job.

Once placed at a job site, youth have weekly check-ins with Career Path staff, and can meet more regularly if needed. Youth and staff also meet regularly to discuss chapters from the Career Path Employment Manual. The Career Path program pays youth bi-weekly for their employment (\$10.25/hour).

METHODOLOGY

McCreary Centre Society carried out an independent evaluation of Career Path from March, 2010 to September, 2012. Following consultation with PLEA, McCreary developed four confidential surveys containing both forced-choice (quantitative) items and open ended (qualitative) questions. Three surveys were developed for youth participants and one was created for employers involved in the program:

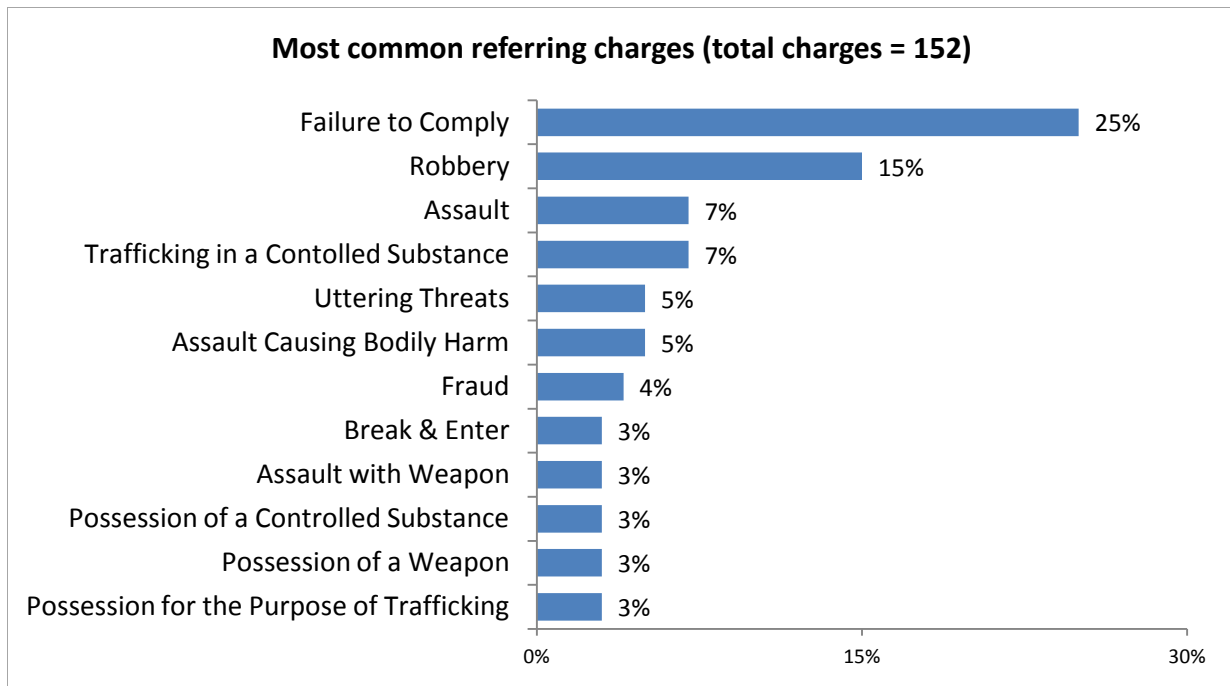
1. *Intake youth survey (“snapshot” survey)* was a 10-page self-report that youth completed when they started the Career Path program. The purpose of this survey was to canvass participants’ baseline behaviours and functioning before starting the program to gain a better understanding of their backgrounds and to assess whether the program targeted the intended group of high-risk youth. Many of the items had been used in other McCreary studies or evaluations, and had been previously piloted and validated with adolescents. The survey tapped demographic variables, housing experiences, school and work, physical and mental health, substance use, aggressive and illegal activity, gang involvement, peer influences, future aspirations, and direct evaluation questions pertaining to youths’ experiences in the Career Path program so far.
2. *Interim youth survey* was a three-page self-report questionnaire that youth completed midway through their 10-week job placement. The purpose was to elicit youths’ feedback so that aspects of the program could be changed and improved while youth were still taking part. The survey included questions about youths’ levels of satisfaction with various aspects of the program (preparatory workshops/classes through PLEA, job placement, and Career Path program overall), how the program could change to better meet the needs of youth, and to what degree (if any) they felt their work skills improved as a result of the program.
3. *Discharge youth survey* was a four-page self-report questionnaire that youth completed at the end of their placement. The survey included questions similar to those in the interim survey as well as additional questions about the degree to which the program impacted youths’ lives (if at all), and whether the program had contributed to increases in youths’ healthy behaviours and functioning (e.g., work skills, mood, self-esteem, hopefulness, community connectedness) and to decreases in risk behaviours (e.g., substance use, illegal behaviour, gang activity, suicidal ideation).
4. *Employer survey* was a two-page questionnaire that canvassed employers’ satisfaction with the program, their perceptions of the impact of the program on youths’ behaviours and functioning, and any suggestions they had for how PLEA could provide additional support to youth and employers involved in the program.

INTAKE AND EMPLOYER INFORMATION (PROVIDED BY CAREER PATH)

A total of 38 employers were involved in Career Path. Employers mentored youth participants at their job site and helped them to integrate with the other employees. Many also took the initiative to support participants in other ways, including assistance with obtaining ID and opening bank accounts.

Job placements were available for participants in a number of fields, including automotive, auto body repair, auto sales, construction, landscaping/gardening, real estate, restaurant, and retail (clothing, computers).

Seventy-four youth took part in Career Path from September, 2009 to September, 2012. Youth entered the program with a range of referring offences, and the most common were Failure to Comply and Robbery.



Twenty-eight youth left the program early but 11 youth re-entered after having left. Reasons for leaving included losing contact with the program due to chronic homelessness, mental health challenges, addiction problems, and/or avoidance of the police; getting jailed; entering a substance use treatment and rehabilitation program; and leaving due to the stigma of being labeled as ‘gang affiliated’. Also, some youth left early because they were no longer involved in the youth justice system, and others left because they returned to school (including college and university). To date, 37 youth have successfully completed the program.

Program information	Number
1. Referrals	106
2. Youth participants	74
3. Youth who left early	28
4. Youth who re-entered the program after leaving	11
5. Youth who successfully completed the program to date	37

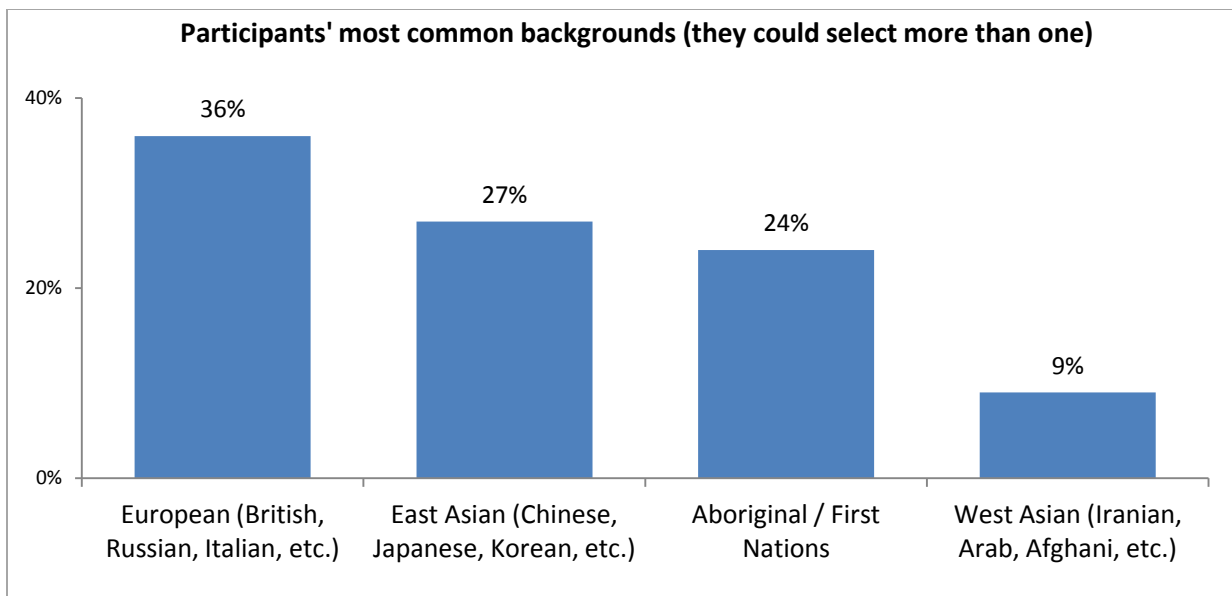
FINDINGS

Results in this report are based on surveys collected from March, 2010 to August 31, 2012. A total of 59 intake surveys, 32 interim surveys, 21 discharge surveys, and 22 employer surveys were completed.

Profile of Youth Participants

Results in this section are from the intake surveys that youth completed when they started the program. This survey canvassed participants’ baseline behaviours and functioning to gain a better understanding of their backgrounds and experiences before starting Career Path.

The majority of participants who completed an intake survey were male (93%). Youth ranged in age from 14 to 22 years, and their average age was 17.3. They most commonly identified as European, East Asian, and/or Aboriginal.



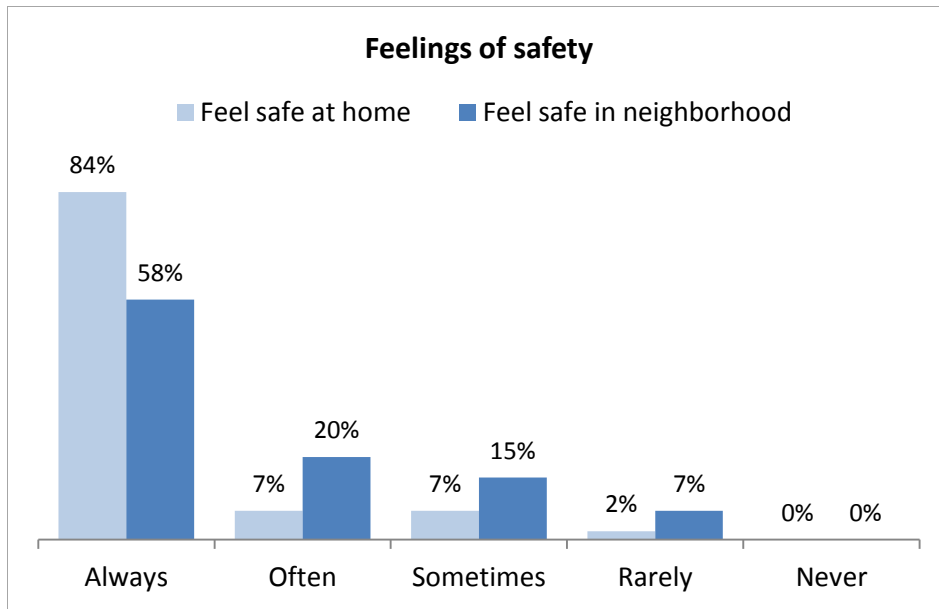
Youth most commonly indicated that they currently lived in their parents’ home (48%) or a foster home (19%). Twelve percent had lived on their own in the past year, and 7% were currently on a Youth Agreement (a total of 12% had been on a Youth Agreement at some point).

Forty-four percent of youth had been in government care (foster home or group home) at some point in their lives, and 61% had been in a custody centre. A number of youth had also experienced precarious housing in the past, including staying in a shelter, couch surfing, and living on the street.

Living situation (intake survey)				
	Live here NOW	Lived here IN PAST 6 MOS	Lived here IN PAST 3 YRS	Lived here IN LIFETIME
Parent's home	48%	50%	79%	90%
Foster home	19%	19%	28%	37%
Other relative's home	7%	11%	25%	52%
Transition house	5%	10%	10%	21%
Group home	5%	10%	17%	34%
Safe house / shelter	3%	13%	13%	28%
Custody centre / jail	0%	14%	32%	61%
Living nowhere / all over (couch surfing)	0%	8%	10%	23%
Treatment program	0%	10%	15%	20%
Hotel	0%	0%	3%	18%
Street	0%	3%	5%	15%
Car	0%	0%	0%	8%
Abandoned house or building (squatting)	0%	3%	3%	8%
Tent	0%	3%	3%	5%

Note: Column totals do not equal 100% due to missing data or to youth marking more than one response.

At intake, most youth reported feeling safe where they were currently living, but they were less likely to feel safe in their neighborhood than at home.



Gang activity and criminal behaviour

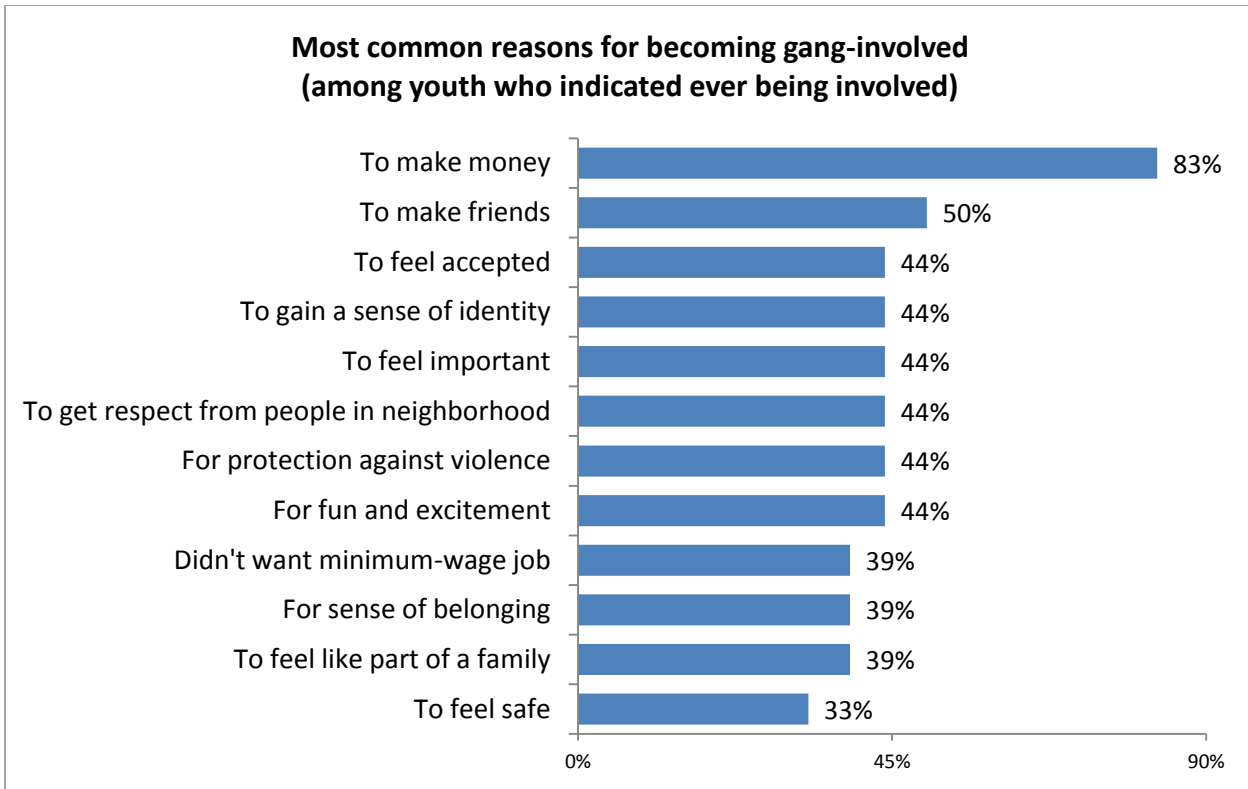
On the intake survey, 40% of youth reported being involved in a gang at some point in their lives. Twenty-six percent indicated having family members who were gang-involved. Compared to youth whose family members were not gang-involved, youth with gang-involved family members were more than twice as likely to report having ever been involved in a gang themselves (73% vs. 28%).

There were inconsistencies in youths' reporting of current gang involvement within the intake survey. For example, only 5% directly reported they were currently involved in a gang, yet a higher percentage of youth later reported that their current gang has a name (16%), a leader (12%), and initiations for new members (8%). Also, when asked what type of gang they were currently involved in (with an option to indicate no current involvement), 11% reported current involvement in an adult gang, and 5% reported involvement in a youth gang (they could select more than one). Further, when later asked about their current level of gang involvement, 17% acknowledged being involved in some capacity, whether as a connected full-time member, an initiated member but not in the inner circle, involved but not a full member, or involved without thinking about levels (numbers in each category were too small to report).

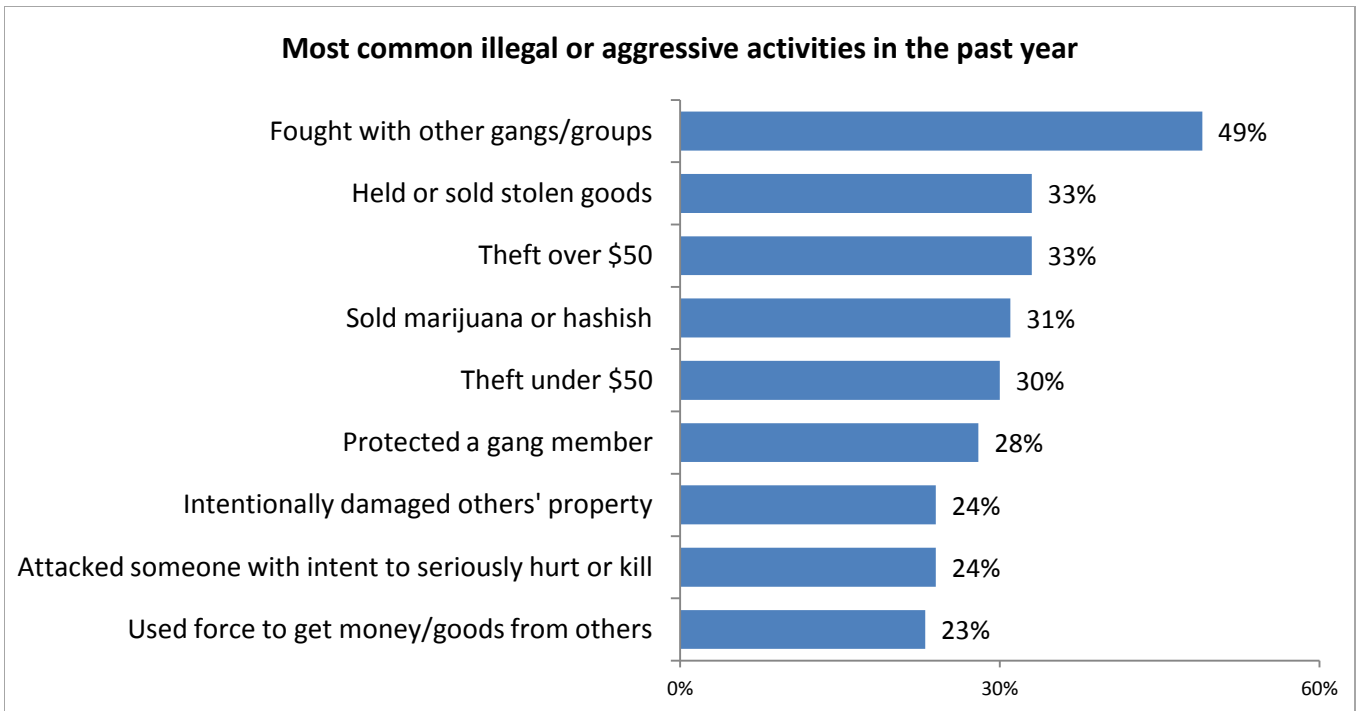
Additionally, 30% reported that their probation officer saw them as currently involved in a gang, and another 30% indicated that others in the community saw them as currently gang-involved, with 15% reporting that people saw them as connected, full-time gang members.

Twenty-one percent of youth reported spending about equal time with gang-involved and non gang-involved peers, whereas the majority (69%) indicated spending more time with non gang-involved friends, and the remaining 10% reported spending more time with gang-involved friends.

Youth who reported ever being involved in a gang indicated a number of reasons for getting involved and staying involved. The most common reasons for both were a desire to make money and wanting to make friends.



When asked about illegal or aggressive activities in the past year, around half of participants (49%) reported 'getting into fights with other gangs or groups,' and 28% reported 'protecting a gang member.' Around 1 in 3 youth were involved in theft, holding or selling stolen goods, or selling marijuana. Also, 24% attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting or killing them, and 26% reported carrying a weapon in the past month (most commonly a knife or razor).

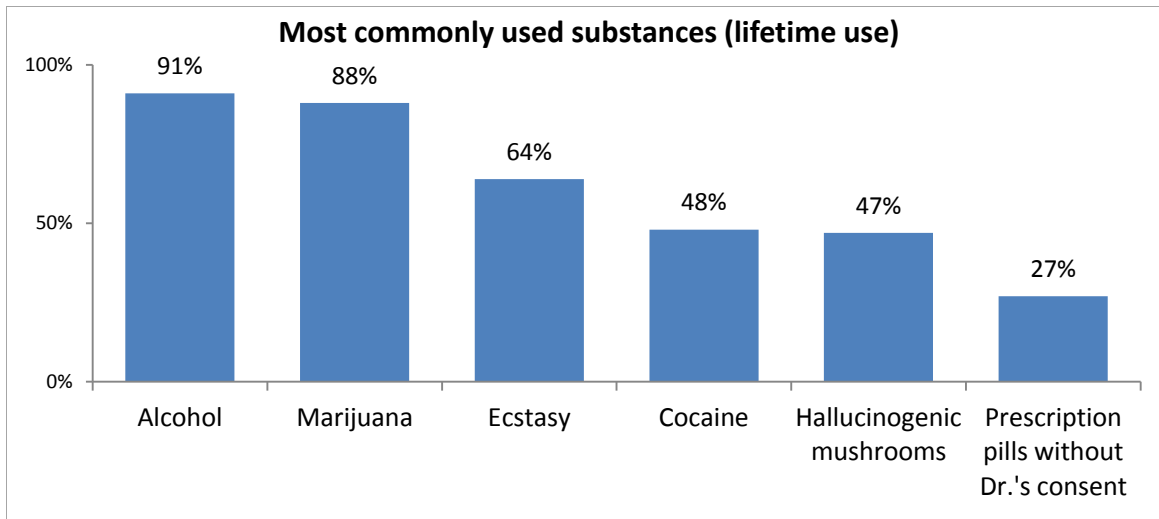


Substance use

At intake, the majority of youth reported drinking alcohol at some point in their life. Among youth who ever drank, the majority drank in the past month and a similar percentage (59%) reported binge drinking in the last month. Binge drinking was defined in this survey as having five or more drinks of alcohol in a row. Those who did binge drink displayed a range in their bingeing behaviour, from bingeing on one day to nineteen days in the past month, although they most commonly reported binge drinking on 2 days.

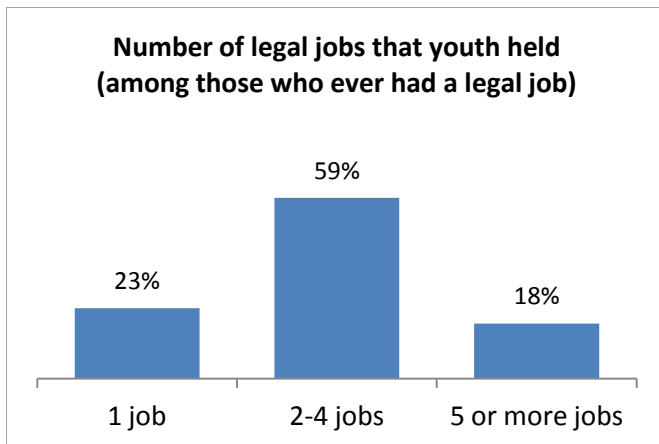
Most youth reported using marijuana at some point. Fifty-four percent used in the past month, including 30% who used on the day before completing the survey.

Participants also used substances other than alcohol and marijuana, and the most common were ecstasy, cocaine, and mushrooms. Eighteen percent used cocaine in the past month, but virtually no youth used other hard drugs in the past month. Among youth who used substances in the last 30 days, 57% reported mixing two or more substances.



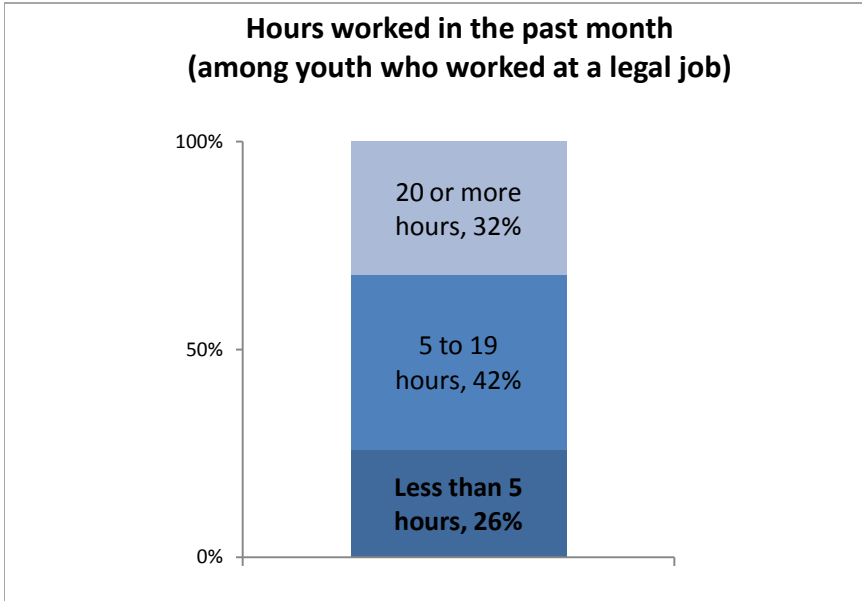
Work and income

Seventy-five percent of youth reported having a legal job at some point, and these youth most commonly had two to four legal jobs over the course of their lives.



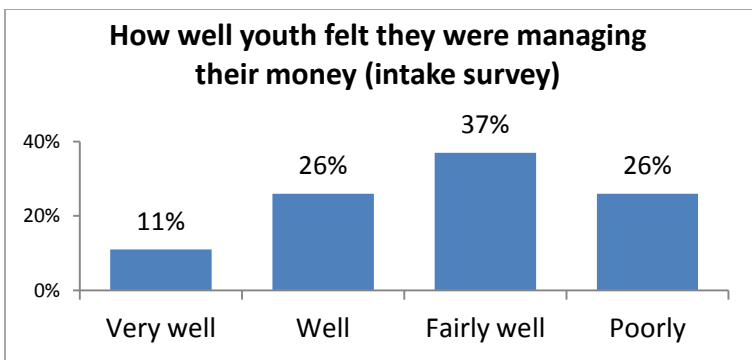
Among the 91% of youth who ever left a legal job, the most common reasons for leaving were being fired (25%), quitting because they found a better job (25%), quitting because they were not treated fairly (15%), and being laid off (13%).

Forty-eight percent of youth reported working at a legal job in the past month. These youth most commonly worked 5 to 19 hours a week.



Most youth (64%) reported at intake that they had received money from their family in the past month, and 28% reported getting money from a legal job. Sixteen percent reported getting money from drug dealing or drug runs, and 17% obtained money from theft and other illegal activities (youth could choose more than one response).

Youth at intake most commonly felt they were managing their money fairly well (37%). A minority reported managing their money very well.



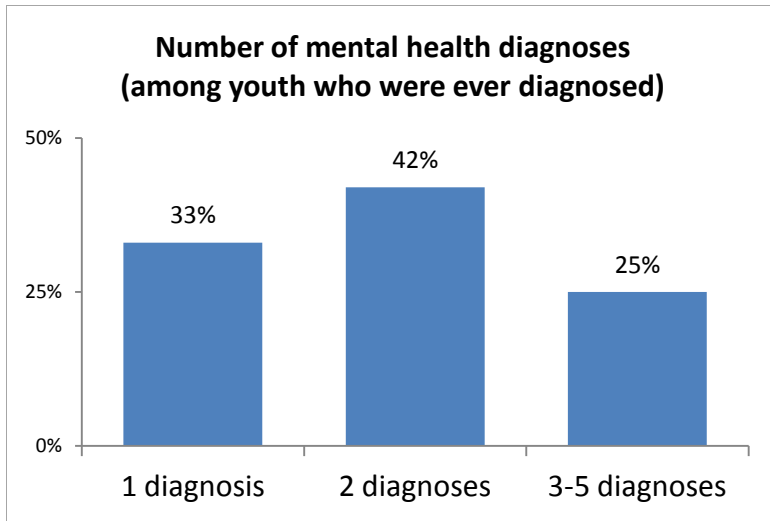
At intake, the majority of youth (84%) reported that their income had stayed the same since starting Career Path. By discharge from the program, youth most commonly reported that their income had gone up (50%) or stayed the same (40%).

When asked at intake if they ever went to bed hungry because there was not enough money for food at home, most youth reported never having this experience. However, almost one quarter went to bed hungry sometimes (17%) or often (7%).

Health and outlook on life

At intake, most youth described their health in the past six months as good or excellent (79%) and saw their current life circumstances as good or excellent (60%), as opposed to fair or poor.

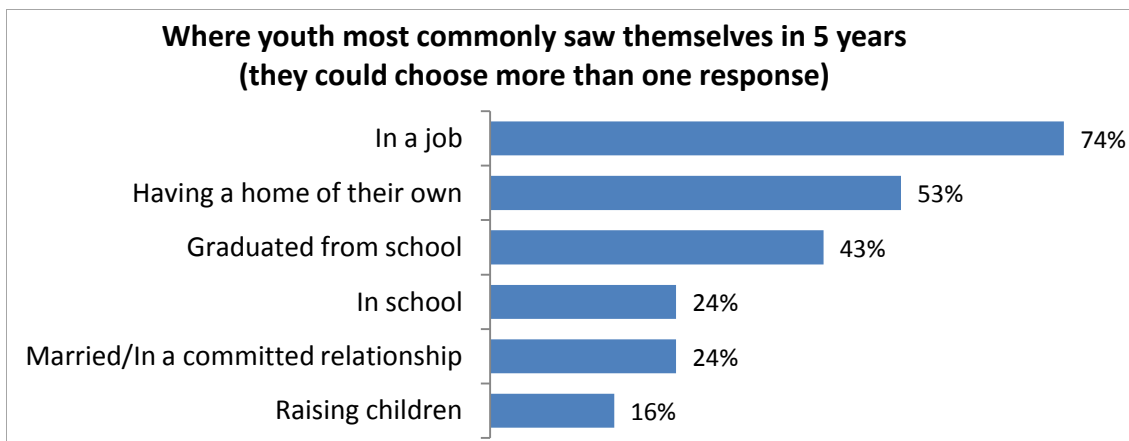
Forty-two percent reported at least one diagnosis, and the most common were ADHD (30%), a learning disability (24%), Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (13%), and/or depression (11%). Among youth with diagnoses, the most common number of reported diagnoses was two.



Seven percent of youth indicated having a limiting mental health condition that prevented them from engaging in activities their peers took part in.

Although the majority of youth reported experiencing little or no stress in the past month, 26% experienced levels that were higher than usual for them. Virtually none had attempted suicide or had self-harmed without suicidal intent in the past six months.

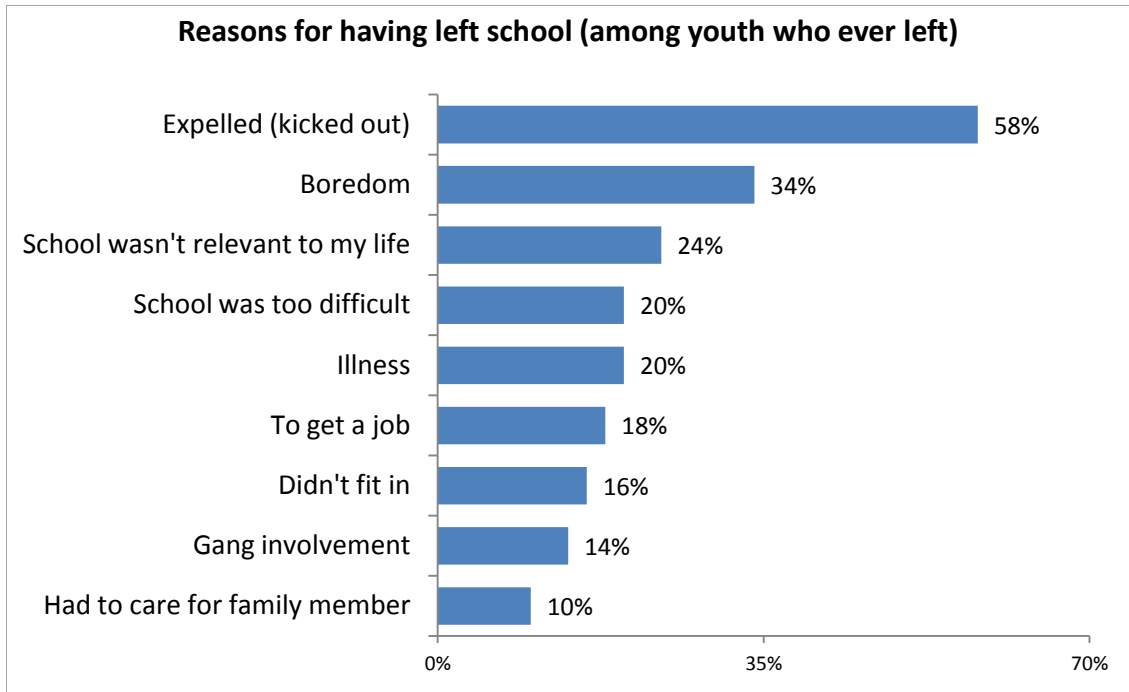
When asked where they saw themselves in five years, many envisioned having a job and/or having a home of their own. Virtually none predicted being in jail, in a gang, on the street, or dead.



School

At intake into the program, 52% of youth were currently attending school, with an equal proportion attending mainstream schools and alternative education programs.

Youth who left school provided a number of reasons for having left (they could choose more than one). The most common were being expelled or boredom. Fourteen percent identified gang involvement, or wanting to spend more time in a gang, as a reason for having left school.

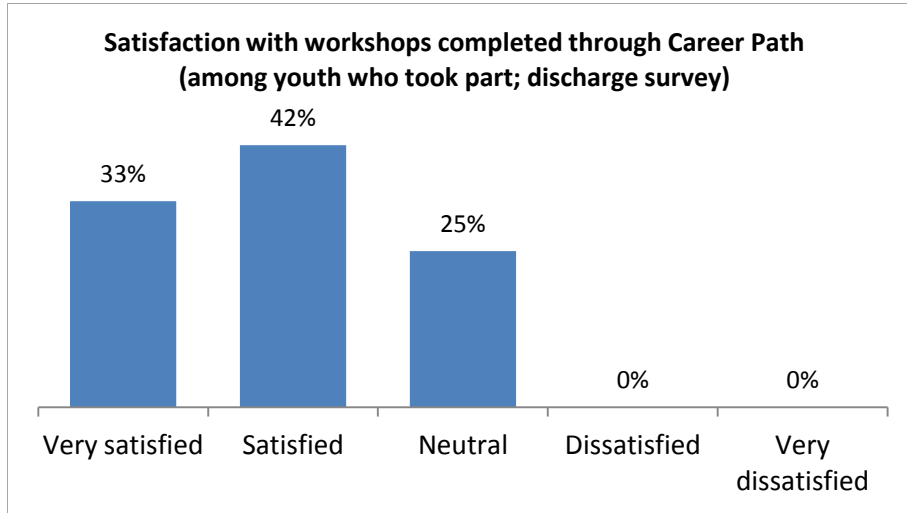


Youth had a range of academic aspirations, and the most common were to graduate from high school (29%) or from a college, technical institute or trades program (29%). Another 18% expected to graduate from university, law school or medical school, and only a minority of youth (5%) did not expect to graduate from high school. Twenty percent of youth were unsure when they would complete their education.

Feedback about the Program

Workshops

Youth were asked on all three surveys (intake, interim, discharge) if they had taken part in workshops or classes through PLEA to prepare them for their job placement. The rate was 32% on the intake survey, 42% five weeks into their job placement (interim survey), and 58% on the discharge survey. Most of these youth had taken a First Aid course (including Occupational First Aid), and some took FOODSAFE or forklift training. Most youth who took a workshop or course were satisfied or very satisfied with it.



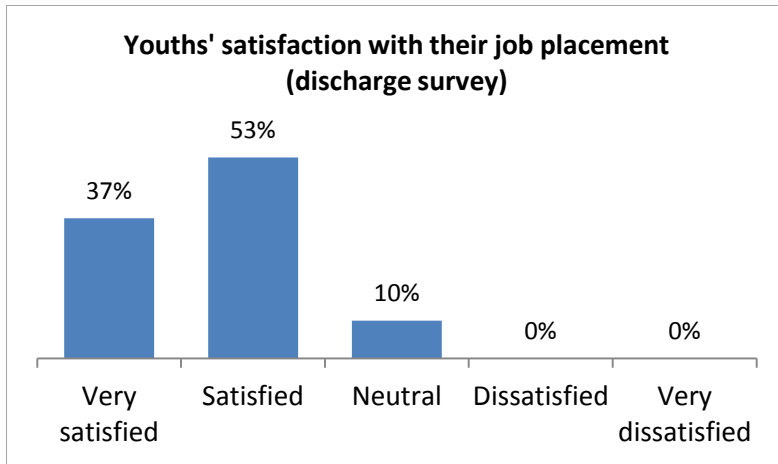
Seventy percent of employers who completed a survey felt that youth participants should complete workshops or classes through PLEA before starting their job placement. They most commonly listed First Aid, and also listed Worksafe, FOODSAFE, WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System), and workshops on work ethic.

“I learned how to be a safe worker” – youth participant
 “First Aid is always a plus in the landscape industry” – employer
 “It felt great getting my FoodSafe” – youth participant

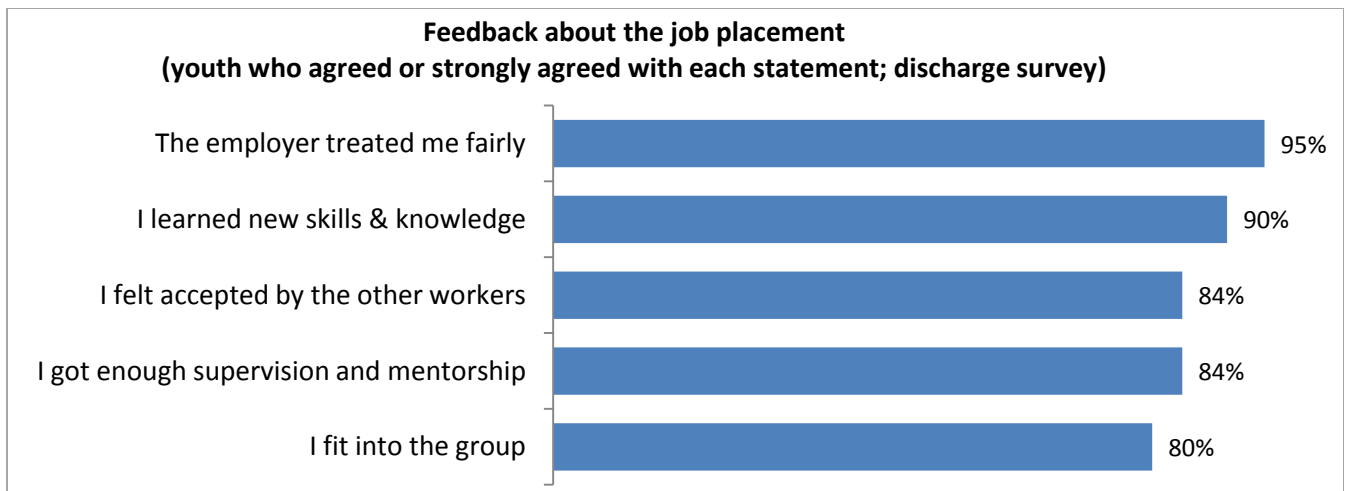
Job placement

More than half of participants (55%) reported at discharge that they had been placed at one job site while in the Career Path program, and the remaining youth indicated having two or more placements. They had most commonly been at their job placement for 8 to 10 weeks (50%), while 30% had been there for 2 to 8 weeks, and the remaining 20% had been there for more than 10 weeks.

Ninety percent of youth reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their job placement, on both the interim and discharge surveys.



Half-way through their job placement and at discharge, most youth felt that the employer treated them fairly; they fit into the group; they felt accepted by the other workers; they learned new skills and knowledge; and they received sufficient supervision and mentorship.



Further, 50% of youth indicated at discharge that they would want to continue working at the same job site if they could, and 40% reported that in fact they would be continuing at that site as an employee once they completed the Career Path program.

“The people I work with are very supportive and extremely punctual and helpful with anything I need.”

“The job I was in treated me well.”

“I’m into a working routine.”

“Things are going quite well and I am very happy with where I’m working.”

“It’s been a good first time job experience.”

“Easy to talk to mentor and constant connections makes it easy to be in a working environment with a positive attitude.”

“It was really easy to get started working with help and the support.”

“The youth...really helped me out a lot and I was impressed by his eagerness to learn more and to do better.” – employer

Overall Career Path program

Youth and employers had positive feedback about Career Path overall. The majority of youth (80%) and employers (91%) were satisfied or very satisfied with their involvement in Career Path. Most youth felt the program had provided them with the help they had needed (90%), that PLEA staff treated them fairly (90%), they had gained important skills and knowledge (85%), and they had found their career path with help from the program (70%).

However, at discharge 58% of youth wished the program was longer while the remaining 42% felt that the program was the right length of time. The majority of employers (69%) felt that the program was the right amount of time. All the employers were interested in staying involved in the program.

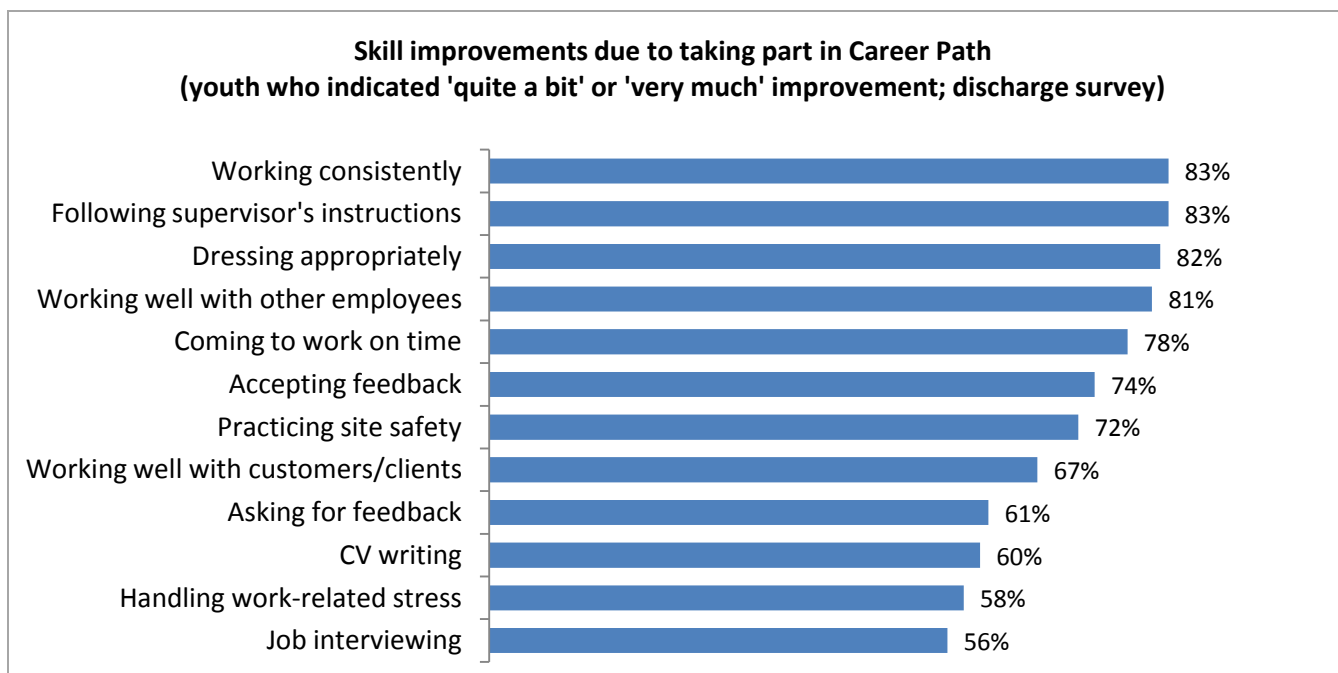
Youth stated that the most helpful aspects of the program were assistance in finding a job and career path, as well as help with learning new skills and with getting their lives on the “right track.” Some acknowledged that the program helped them to stay “out of trouble” and out of custody. Many expressed gratitude toward PLEA staff for their help and support, and appreciated their non-judgmental approach. Employers also praised the dedicated staff, and felt that the program was helpful not only to youth but also to employers because it provided them with both work-place assistance and a sense that they were contributing to the community.

Most youth did not list any aspect of the program as unhelpful and had no suggestions on how the program could change. One stated, “I think Career Path is already doing their best.” However, one remarked disliking the amount of time he had to spend cleaning up rather than doing “actual work,” and a few others suggested that the program could pay participants more money (one suggested \$15

an hour rather than the \$10.25 they were receiving). Another youth suggested that the program could provide mentors who would meet with youth privately to “encourage them, show them alternative lifestyles rather than gang life.”

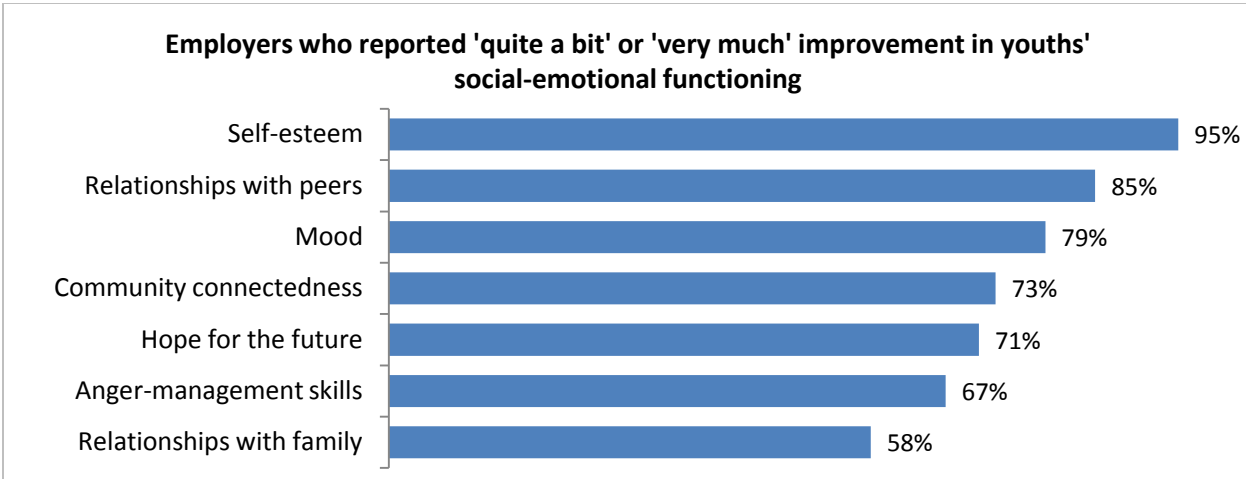
Employers suggested that PLEA could help youth participants by providing résumé/CV writing support, computer skills workshops, communication skills workshops, ‘dress for success’ workshops, and support for mechanical training and pre-apprenticeship programs. When asked what else PLEA could do to support employers like them, they indicated that PLEA could provide wage and course subsidies and a structured program for an extended period of time (beyond 10 weeks). One also stated that he appreciated PLEA staff dropping in on an informal basis, but it would also be helpful to schedule meetings ahead of time with the youth participant, employer, and PLEA staff to ensure that everyone is on the “same page” and to plan for next steps. Another employer added that having committed volunteers to work individually with the youth could help the young people hone their job skills.

On both the interim and discharge surveys, youth indicated experiencing improvements in many work-related skills as a result of participating in Career Path. As illustrated in the following graph, the most commonly identified improvements involved working consistently, following supervisors’ instructions, dressing appropriately for the job, and working well with other employees. Similarly, many employers indicated that the youth gained important skills in these areas.



Further, the majority of youth reported at discharge that their participation in Career Path helped to decrease their substance use (71%) and criminal behaviour (67%). Moreover, 63% of youth reported that they were less gang-involved because of their participation in Career Path.

Most employers reported that youth on placement at their job site showed marked improvements in their overall mood, hopefulness, self-esteem, anger-management skills, relationships with family, and connections to the community as a result of taking part in Career Path. Most youth also reported improvements in these areas.



Youths' comments...

“There’s no judgment or criticism.”

“I have found a career that I will pursue in the future.”

“[The PLEA workers] are very hard working people and caring people.”

“Career Path is a very well organized program allowing kids like myself to slowly break into the real world. I have no negative comments for this program.”

“I thank Career Path for putting me on a right way and... helping me a lot... I will never forget what they [have] done for me.”

“The people at Career Path take the effort and time to help me out.”

“I have been having a great time with PLEA and it's safe to say I have changed for the better and I am more geared towards a career.”

“They can find you a job instantly and you get paid.”

“They helped me find a good job.”

“[Career Path] found me a job and kept me from going to jail.”

“I’m learning new things, acquiring skills.”

“[I got help] to find my career path.”

“[I appreciate] the help from PLEA workers and having a great job placement and having awesome support. And also having people help with important things such as ID etc.”

“The program has improved how my résumé will look.”

“It is helping me and I'm learning.”

“The help is very useful and guides me well in life.”

Employers' comments...

“We love the way [PLEA staff] follow up with us within the program frequently.”

“It was a pleasure having extra help with my business and I am very pleased with [the youth's] work and look forward to having some more help.”

“PLEA staff is amazing - great mentors with a realistic approach to making a difference in the community.”

“Great program - Great support workers who are really connected to the youth.”

“I really enjoy this program because I'm also helping the community to provide an environment for the young people to get back on track.”

“PLEA is always available when you call, and supports the young person and employer well.”

“Great program for the kids, so that they can gain experience for the 'work world.'”

“This program really helped the young people to get back on track.”

“PLEA are on top of everything, offer a great help to employers as well as to the young people.”

“It's a great program - reaching youth that need the support.”

“[Career Path] is a powerful program with HUGE benefits for participants...and our organization.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Consistent with findings from the previous Career Path evaluation reports (November 2010, March 2011, March 2012), youths' survey responses suggested that the program targeted the intended population of youth. Participants reported more high-risk behaviours and presented as more vulnerable than youth across the province as a whole. For example, they reported markedly higher rates of substance use, histories of unstable housing, and government care experience than youth who completed the most recent BC Adolescent Health Survey (McCreary's 2008 BC AHS). They also reported academic challenges (e.g., dropping out of school) and relatively high rates of mental health diagnoses and aggressive/illegal activities. The majority had also been held in a custody centre at some point.

In terms of gang involvement, 2 in 5 youth reported involvement at some point in their lives. Youth who indicated having gang-involved family members were more likely to report having been gang-involved themselves. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution because all participants were referred to Career Path because of their gang activity. The finding may reflect youths' response patterns on the survey rather than their gang involvement per se. Specifically, youth who were hesitant to disclose gang involvement among family members may have also been guarded about reporting their own gang activity, compared to youth who responded to these survey questions more openly.

At intake, youth seemed to under-report not only their previous gang involvement but also their current involvement. Only 5% of youth directly indicated that they were currently involved in a gang. However, a greater number later identified as currently involved in an adult gang, and 17% reported current involvement in at least some capacity, including as an initiated member. Several also acknowledged that their probation officer and others in the community saw them as currently gang-involved. Additionally, around half of youth reported fighting with other gangs, and more than 1 in 4 reported protecting a gang member in the past year.

Under-reporting and inconsistent reporting of gang activity may have resulted from leanness about identifying as gang-involved for a number of reasons, including fear of experiencing stigma or discrimination at their job placement, fear of losing their job, or fear of repercussions from gang-involved peers.

Although youth under-reported their rates of gang-involvement on the intake survey, on the discharge survey the majority (63%) indicated a decrease in their gang involvement due to participating in Career Path. Most youth also reported other improvements because of their involvement in the program, including reduced substance use and illegal activity, as well as improved psychosocial functioning (increased self-esteem, hopefulness, overall mood, anger-management skills, relationships with peers and family, and connection to their community). Youth also reported improvements in various work-related skills, including working consistently, following instructions, accepting feedback, and working well with others. Employers also witnessed skill improvements and improvements in social and emotional functioning among the youth at their site.

By discharge from Career Path, half of youth reported an increase in their income since starting the program. This finding was noteworthy given that participants' most common reason for both getting involved and staying involved in a gang had been to make money. The second most common reason for gang involvement was to make friends, and it is therefore notable that the majority of youth felt accepted by other employees and felt that they fit into the group while on their job placement. These outcomes may be good incentives for youth to remain on a career path and to avoid future gang-involvement.

Results indicated that youth appreciated being involved in the program. Most felt they had received the help they needed through PLEA, and expressed gratitude toward PLEA staff for their support and dedication. Additionally, the majority reported satisfaction with the workshops or courses they had been involved in, and most youth were satisfied with their job placement. By discharge, most participants felt they had found their career path because of their involvement in the program.

A number of youth were given the opportunity to continue working at their job site after completing the program, which provided them with even more support for pursuing their career path and staying on a healthy trajectory.

Youth and employers provided suggestions for how the program could build on its strengths to become even stronger. A similar suggestion from a youth and employer was for the program to offer mentors who could meet with participants privately to offer guidance, support and assistance with developing job skills. The mentors would also model alternatives to gang lifestyles.

The findings were relatively consistent across all four evaluation reports. However, as more youth completed surveys, the larger sample sizes allowed for more results to be reported. Also, the later reports included results from female participants, who more recently started taking part in the program which initially consisted only of males.

The evaluation results have indicated that PLEA's Career Path program has met its goals of increasing participants' ability to function in work and community environments, of enhancing their future job prospects, and of reducing their risk of future gang involvement.

In terms of the evaluation methodology, the use of confidential surveys was an effective way of collecting useful data among this group of youth. Although results may have reflected an underestimate of participants' gang involvement and other high-risk activities, they nonetheless provided valuable information on the youth in Career Path and the effectiveness of the program. Any future evaluation of this program could entail modifying the methodology, such as including new survey questions, to collect additional information that has not yet been captured.