



PLEA's Career Path Program

EVALUATION REPORT – March, 2011

Evaluation by:

Dr. Maya Peled
Research Associate & Program Evaluator

Annie Smith
Executive Director

McCreary Centre Society
3552 East Hastings Street
Vancouver, BC V5K 2A7
www.mcs.bc.ca

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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/hour).

METHODOLOGY

McCreary Centre Society is carrying out an independent evaluation of the Career Path program. Following consultation with PLEA, McCreary developed four confidential surveys containing forced-choice (quantitative) and open ended (qualitative) items, specifically three surveys for youth participants and one for employers involved in the program:

1. *Intake youth survey (“snapshot”)* is a 10-page self-report that youth complete when they start the Career Path program. The purpose is to assess youths’ baseline behaviours and psychosocial functioning coming into the program, and their preliminary impressions of the program. Many of the items have been used in other McCreary studies or evaluations, and have been previously piloted and validated with adolescents. The survey taps demographic variables, housing experiences, school and work, physical and mental health, substance use, delinquent 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 (“5-week mark”)* is a three-page self-report questionnaire that youth complete midway through their 10-week job placement. The purpose is to elicit youths’ feedback so that aspects of the program can be changed and improved while the youth are still involved in it. The survey includes 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 feel their work skills have improved as a result of the program.
3. *Discharge youth survey* is a four-page self-report questionnaire that is similar to the interim survey. However it includes additional questions about the degree to which the program has impacted youths’ lives (if at all), and whether it has contributed to increases in healthy behaviours and functioning (e.g., work skills, mood, self-esteem, hopefulness, community connectedness) and to decreases in applicable risk behaviours (e.g., substance use, illegal behaviour, gang activity, suicidal ideation).
4. *Employer survey* is a two-page questionnaire that canvasses employers’ satisfaction with the program, their perceptions of the impact of the program on youths’ behaviours and functioning, and any suggestions they have for how PLEA could provide additional support to youth and employers involved in the program.

INTAKE AND EMPLOYER INFORMATION (PROVIDED BY CAREER PATH)

Twelve employers were currently involved in the program. One employer withdrew from the program but was open to the possibility of working with another youth in the future.

There were 18 job placements in various fields available for youth participants, including automotive, auto body repair, auto sales, construction, landscaping/gardening, real estate, restaurant, and retail (clothing, computers).

Thirty-three youth had taken part in the program as of March 15, 2011. Twelve successfully completed the program. Nine youth left before program completion. Five of these nine youth subsequently re-entered the program but then lost contact again before program completion. One of the youth who returned had successfully completed the program but had returned for a placement in a different field before losing contact with the program.

Reasons for leaving early 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; leaving due to the stigma of being labeled as 'gang affiliated'; and returning to school.

Intake information	
Referrals to date	40
Youth participants to date	33
Youth who left early	9
Youth who re-entered the program after leaving	5
Youth who completed the program to date	12

FINDINGS

Results from the youth baseline survey (n=28 surveys), interim survey (completed five weeks into the job placement; n=14), and discharge survey (n=13) are presented in this report. Additionally, results are included from the eight employers who completed a survey as of March 15, 2011 (no new employer surveys were completed after the December, 2010 interim report).

Profile of Youth Participants

Results reported in this section are from the baseline or “snapshot” survey that youth completed soon after intake into the program. The purpose of this survey was to canvass youth participants’ baseline behaviours and functioning before starting the program to gain a better understanding of their backgrounds and to assess whether the program is targeting the intended group of high-risk youth.

The results reported may be an underestimate of youth participants’ high-risk behaviours. Despite the confidential nature of the survey, they may not have answered honestly and openly due to fear of possible repercussions. Nonetheless, youths’ responses on this survey suggest that they represent the high-risk group that was intended to participate in this program. Results from the 2008 Adolescent Health Survey indicated that the majority of BC youth are engaging in health-promoting behaviours and are less likely to use alcohol and marijuana than their peers a decade earlier. Youth in the Career Path program reported more high-risk behaviours (e.g., higher rates of substance use) and presented as more vulnerable than youth across the province as a whole.

The 28 male participants who completed an intake survey as of March 15, 2011 ranged in age from 15 to 22 years, and the average age was 17.6 years. They most commonly identified as East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.; 39%), West Asian (Afghani, Iranian, Arab, etc.; 18%), European (21%) or Aboriginal/First Nations (14%; youth could choose more than one background).

Most youth indicated that they currently lived in their parents’ home (65%). Forty-four percent indicated staying in a custody centre at some point in their lives.

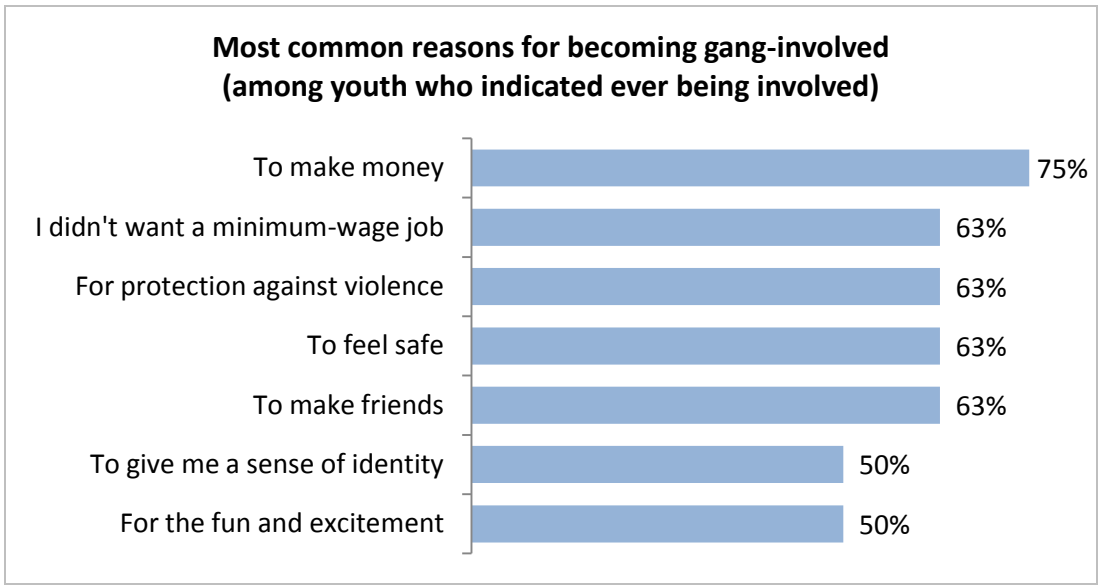
Most youth reported currently feeling safe in their home but 22% did not often feel safe in their neighbourhood.

Gang activity and delinquent behaviour

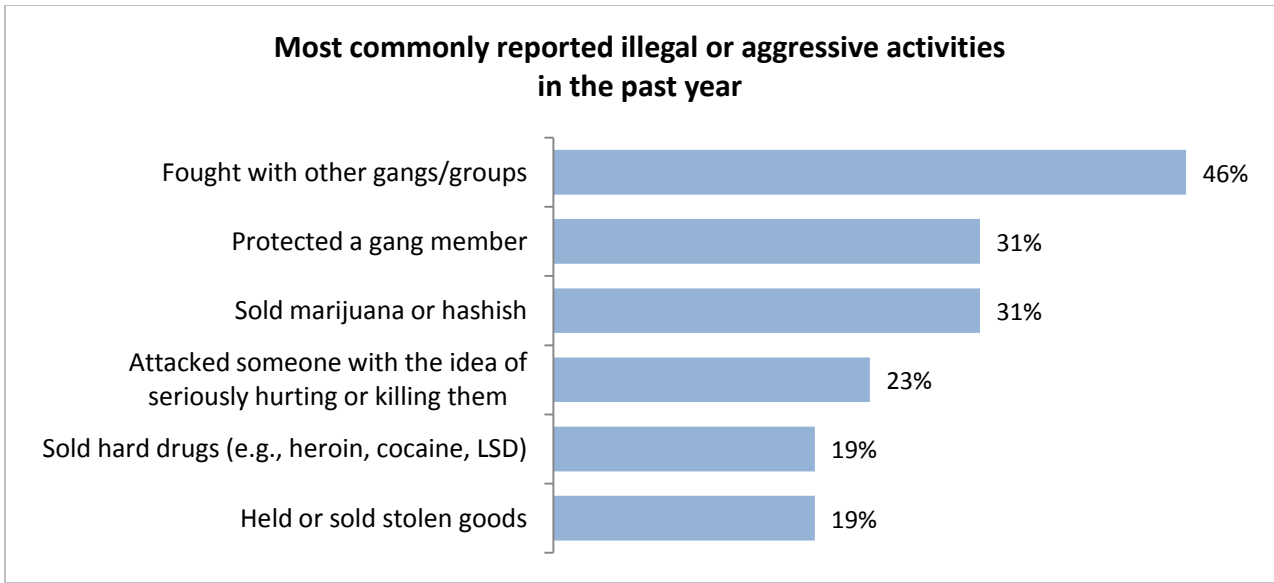
On the intake survey, only 25% of youth reported ever being involved in a gang, and virtually none reported current gang involvement. However, 39% reported that their probation officer saw them as currently involved in a gang, and 31% indicated that others in the community saw them as currently gang-involved.

Twenty-seven percent of youth reported spending about equal time with gang-involved and not gang-involved peers, whereas the majority (65%) indicated spending more time with non gang-involved friends, and virtually none reported spending more time with gang-involved friends. Thirty-six percent of youth indicated that they would still spend time with peers who were getting them in trouble.

Youth who reported ever being involved in a gang indicated a number of reasons for getting involved. The most common reasons included wanting to make money and not wanting a minimum-wage job; for protection and safety; and to make friends. Once involved in a gang, youth most commonly identified making money and having a sense of identity as reasons for staying involved.



Most youth indicated not engaging in illegal or aggressive activities in the past year (fighting, selling drugs, theft, break-and-enters, etc.). However, 46% reported 'getting into fights with other gangs or groups,' and almost 1 in 3 youth reported 'protecting a gang member' in the past year. Also, 21% reported carrying a weapon in the past month (e.g., a club, pipe or knife).

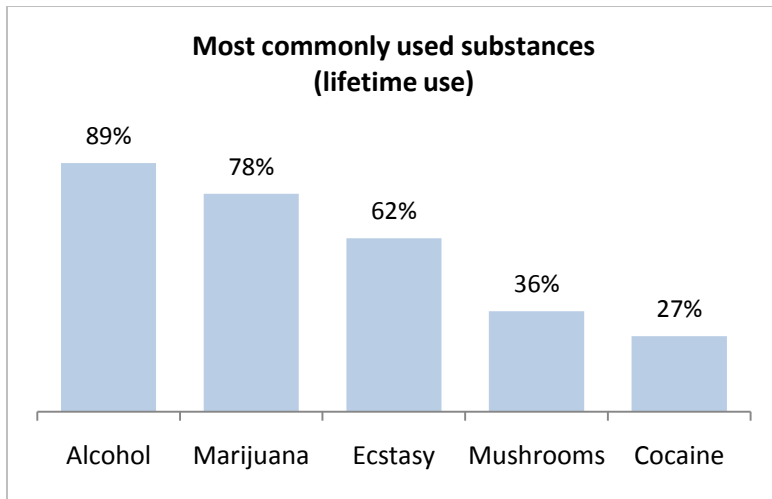


Substance use

At intake, the majority of youth reported drinking alcohol at some point in their life, and 50% drank in the past month. Among youth who ever drank, 42% reported binge drinking in the past 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 one day to nine days in the last month.

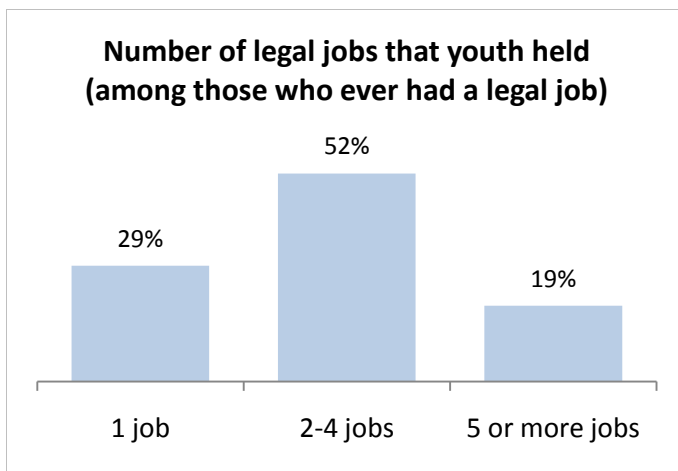
Most youth reported using marijuana at some point. Forty-one percent used in the past month, including 19% who used on the day before completing the survey.

Participants were also asked about their use of other substances, and they most commonly reported using ecstasy, mushrooms or cocaine at some point in their lives.



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 44% of youth who reported working at a legal job in the past month, 50% worked 5 to 19 hours, and 42% worked 20 or more hours.

Most youth (71%) indicated receiving money from their family in the past month, and 36% reported getting money from a legal job (youth could choose more than one response). Virtually none reported getting money from illegal activities, such as drug dealing or theft

The majority of youth (86%) reported that their income had stayed the same since starting the Career Path program, whereas 9% (n=2) reported a decrease in their income and 5% (n=1) reported an increase. These findings were comparable at intake and discharge.

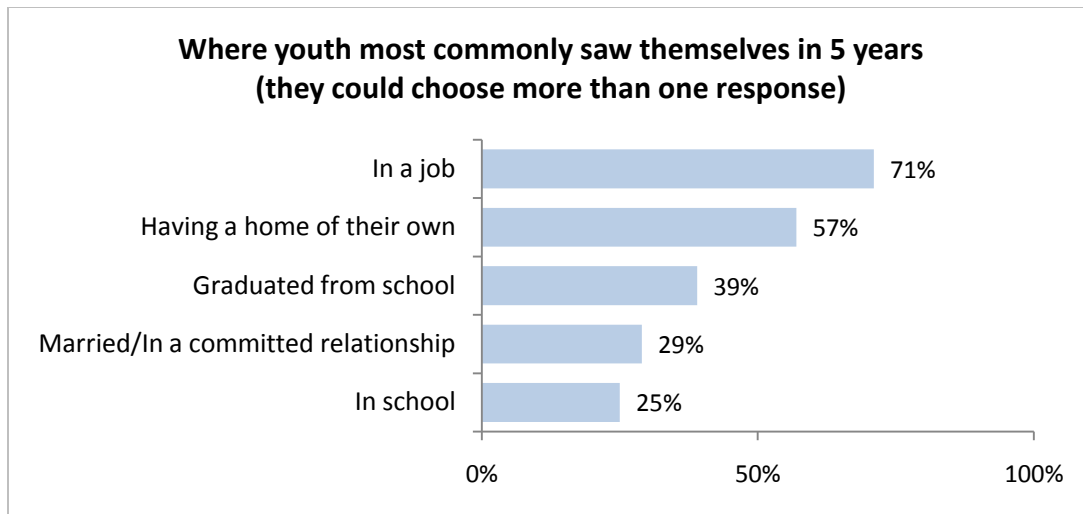
Health and outlook on life

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 (71%), as opposed to fair or poor.

Thirty percent of youth reported at least one mental health diagnosis, and the most common were ADHD (27%) and/or a learning disability (15%).

Although the majority reported experiencing little or no stress in the past month, 21% of youth experienced levels that were higher than usual for them. Virtually none of the youth engaged in deliberate self-harm without suicidal intent or in suicide attempts in the past six months.

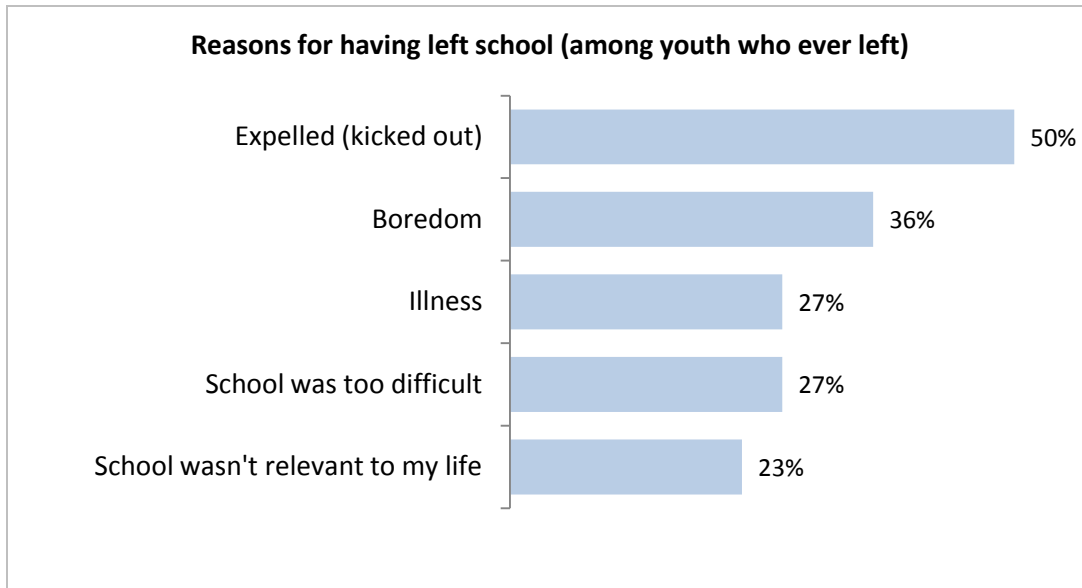
In terms of where they saw themselves in five years, many envisioned having a job and/or having a home of their own. None predicted being in jail, in a gang, on the street, or dead.



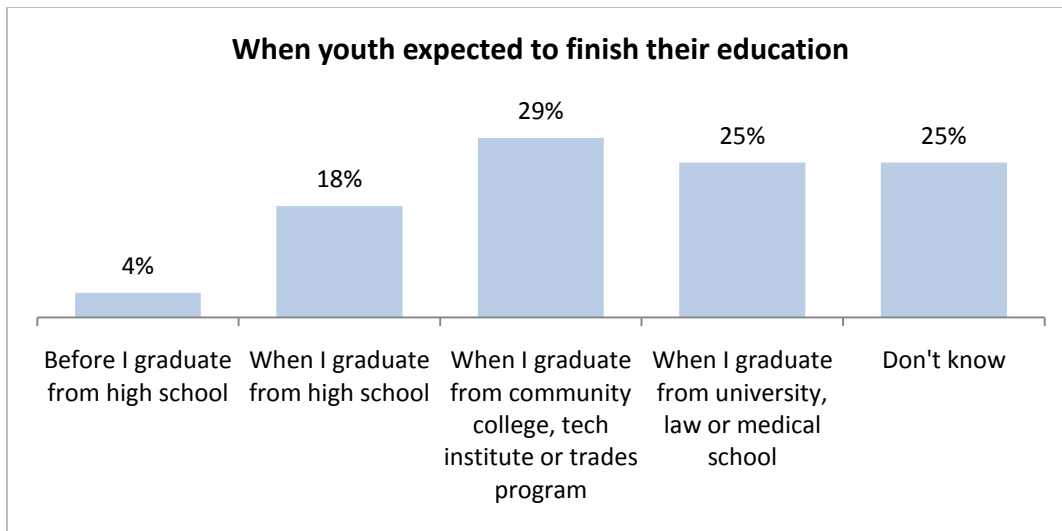
School

The majority of youth reported currently attending school, with 39% attending mainstream school and 21% attending an alternative education program.

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. Virtually none identified gang involvement, or wanting to spend more time in a gang, as a reason for having left school.



Youth entering Career Path had a range of academic aspirations (see graph below), and virtually none intended on completing their education before graduating from high school. One in four youth were unsure when they would finish 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 21% on the “snapshot” survey, 36% five weeks into their job placement (interim survey), and 50% on the discharge survey. Most of these youth had taken a First Aid course. The majority of participants who took a workshop or course found it helpful.

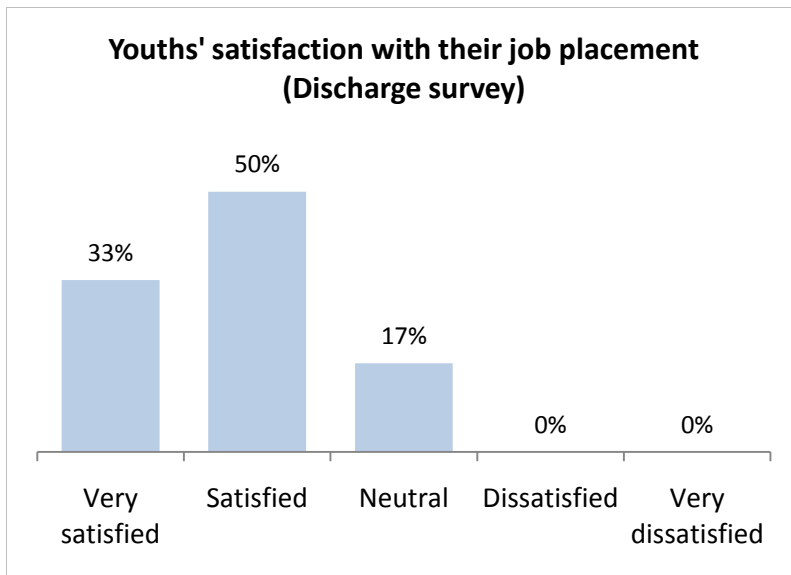
Seventy-five percent of the employers who completed a survey felt that youth participants should complete workshops or classes through PLEA before starting their job placement. They most commonly listed First Aid, and also listed Worksafe, Food Safe, WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System),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

“I learned how to be a safe worker”

Job placement

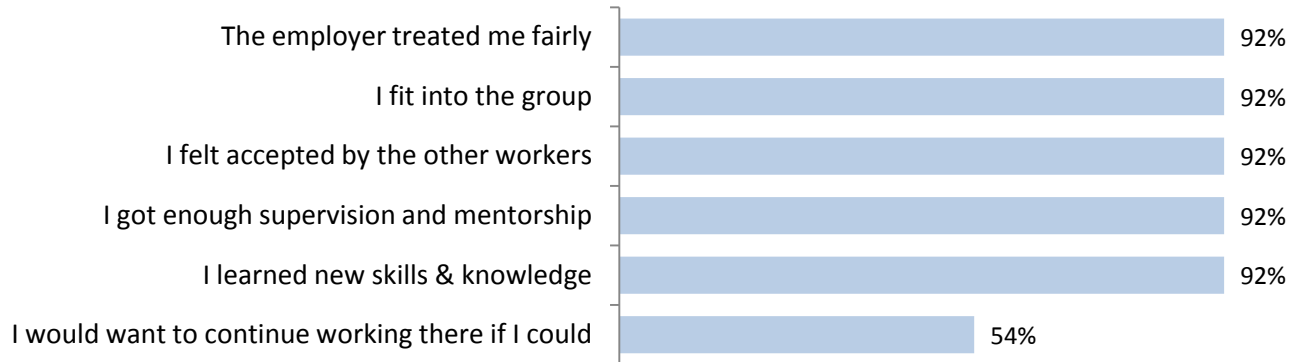
Most youth (77%) reported at discharge that they were placed at one job site while in the Career Path program, and the remaining youth indicated having two or more placements. The majority (62%) had been at their job placement for 8 to 10 weeks, whereas 23% had been there for 2 to 7 weeks, and the remaining 15% were there for more than 10 weeks.

When youth completed the interim survey half-way through their job placement, the majority (77%) reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their placement so far. At discharge, 83% reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their job placement, and none were dissatisfied.



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.

**Feedback about the job placement
(youth who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement; Discharge survey)**



Fifty-four percent indicated that they would want to continue working at the same job site if they could, and 39% reported that in fact they would be continuing at the same job site as an employee once they completed the Career Path program.

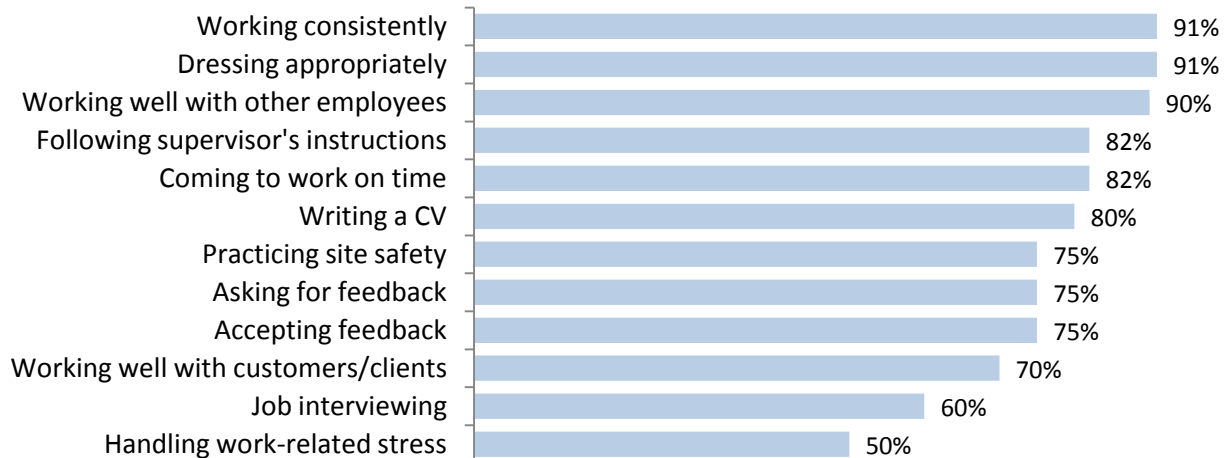
“It’s a good job and I thank [the PLEA worker] for helping me.”

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

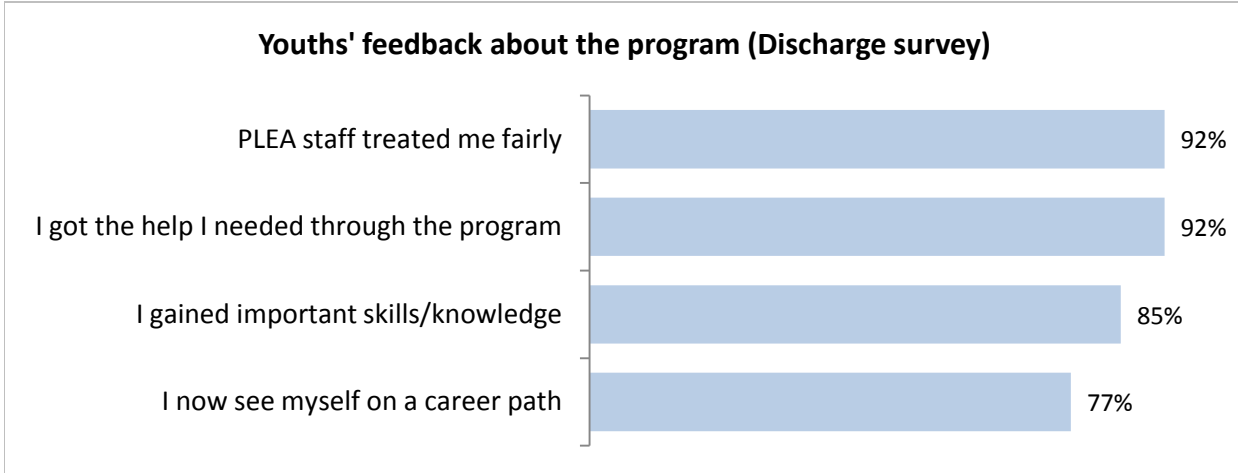
Overall Career Path program

On both the interim and discharge surveys, youth indicated experiencing ‘quite a bit’ or ‘very much’ improvement in many work-related skills as a result of participating in Career Path. The most commonly identified improvements involved work ethic, positive interactions with other employees, and dressing appropriately for the job. Similarly, the majority of employers indicated that the youth gained important skills in these domains.

**Skills improvements from participating in Career Path
(youth who indicated 'quite a bit' or 'very much' improvement; Discharge survey)**

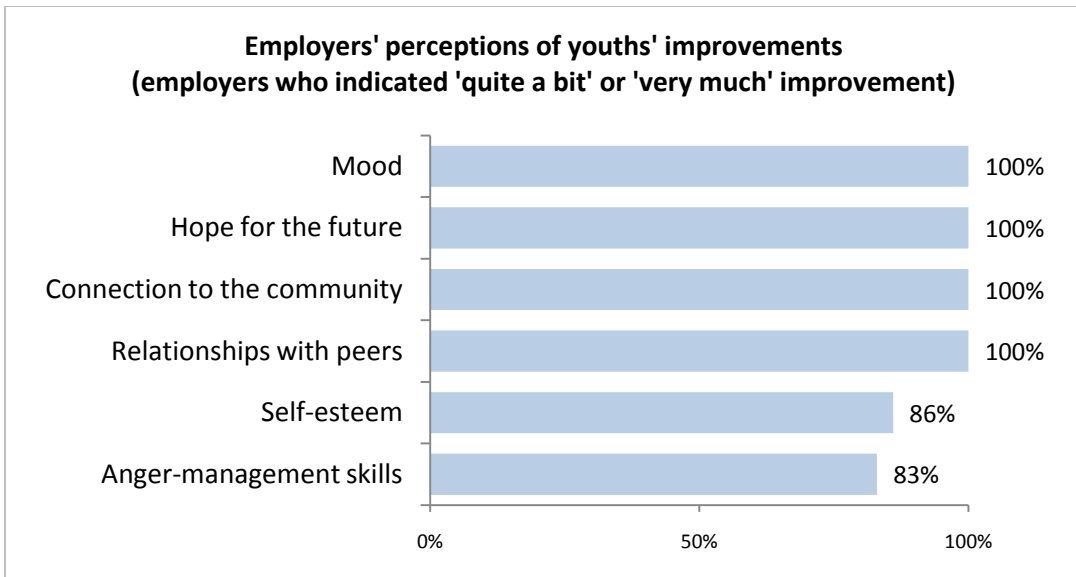


The majority of youth had positive feedback about the Career Path program at both the five-week mark and at discharge. Most agreed or strongly agreed that they were getting the help they needed through the program, PLEA staff treated them fairly, they were gaining important skills and knowledge, and they were finding their career path with help from the program.

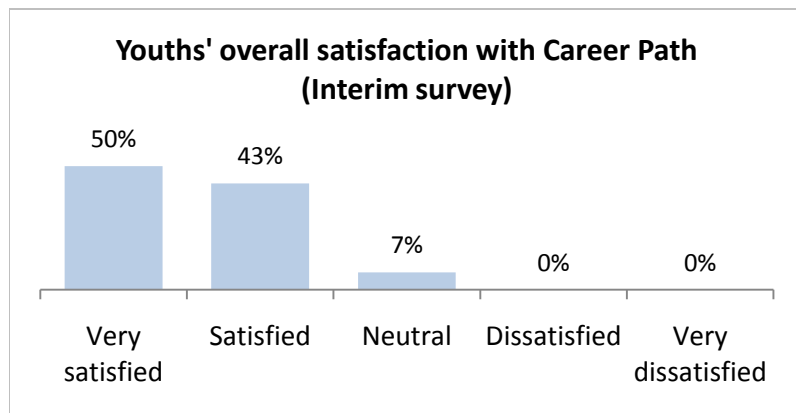


Further, at discharge from the program most youth reported that their participation in Career Path helped to increase their hope for the future (70%) and to reduce their criminal behaviour (63%). Moreover, 55% reported being less gang-involved because of their participation in the Career Path program.

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



The majority of youth were satisfied or very satisfied with their overall experience in the program, both at the five-week mark and at discharge. However, at discharge 54% wished the program was longer while the remaining 46% felt that the program was the right length of time. The majority of employers (88%) also indicated being satisfied or very satisfied with their involvement in Career Path, and all 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 a career path, as well as help with getting their lives on the “right track” and staying “out of trouble.” Many expressed gratitude toward PLEA staff for their help and support, and appreciated that staff did not criticize or judge them.

What I'm finding helpful is...

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

“They help me find a good job.”

“[Getting help] to find my career path.”

“Friendly staff.”

“[Getting] the support and help that is needed.”

“There's no judgment or criticism.”

“I learned lots of new skills.”

“Finding a career and being able to aim my life in the right track.”

Most youth did not list any aspect of the program as unhelpful and had no suggestions for 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). Despite these suggestions, the youth were very positive about the program and grateful for the help they received.

Employers suggested that PLEA could help youth participants by providing resumé/CV writing support, computer skills workshops, communication skills workshops, 'dress for success' workshops, and support for mechanical training and pre-apprenticeship programs. There was also a suggestion that PLEA could contribute to purchasing equipment and clothing that youth need at their job placement (e.g., tools, safety wear). 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 it would be helpful to schedule meetings in advance with the youth participant, employer, and PLEA staff to ensure that everyone is on the "same page" and to plan for next steps.

Comments from youth participants

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

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

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

"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."

Comments from employers

"We love the way you follow up with us within the program frequently."

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

"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."

KEY FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

As was the case in the first evaluation report (December 2010), the findings in this report indicated that most youth participants did not directly identify as ever being involved in gang activity. Reasons may have included a reluctance to openly answer questions about gang activity due to youths' fear of being identified as gang-involved and experiencing stigma or discrimination at their job placement, losing their job, or repercussions from gang-involved peers. However, youths' responses did suggest peripheral gang activity, including fighting with or protecting a gang member. Some also acknowledged that their probation officer and others in the community saw them as currently gang-involved. Moreover, at discharge from the program, more than half the youth reported a decrease in their gang involvement due to participating in Career Path.

Youths' other survey responses were also an indication that the Career Path program has been targeting the intended population of high-risk youth. For example, compared to youth across the province, participants in Career Path reported markedly higher rates of substance use. They also reported academic challenges (e.g., dropping out of school) and relatively high rates of mental health diagnoses and aggressive/illegal activities. Also, more than 2 in 5 youth reported being held in a custody centre at some point.

Results suggested that youth benefited from taking part in the Career Path program, and they provided positive feedback about their experiences. Those who took part in workshops or classes through PLEA reported that these were helpful, and most of the employers recommended that youth participants complete relevant workshops or classes before starting their job placements.

Youth and employers identified improvements in a number of youths' work-related skills, including working consistently while on site and working well with colleagues. Most youth reported getting the help they needed through PLEA, and employers reported increases in youths' healthy behaviours and functioning as a result of taking part in the program. Youth and employers also expressed gratitude toward PLEA staff for their support and dedication.

At discharge, the majority of youth saw themselves on a career path as a result of participating in the program. Some youth were given the opportunity to continue working at their job site after completing the program, which has provided them with even more support for pursuing their career path and staying on a healthy trajectory.

Based on the evaluation results, this program is meeting the needs of the youth participants. All participants have been males, and the absence of female participants was discussed with Career Path staff. One reason for this absence may be that probation officers regard this practical, hands-on program as best suited for the needs of gang-involved males. Perhaps gang-involved females are more likely to be referred to other types of programs, such as those that directly address mental health and addictions, or sexual exploitation.

The evaluation design, involving completion of surveys by youth and employers, is working effectively and yielding informative data. Further, the interim survey is a useful mechanism that PLEA staff have used to monitor progress and collect on-going feedback. This formative evaluation tool has allowed staff to make immediate improvements to the program which youth currently in Career Path can benefit from. Data collection will continue using the same methodology.