THE REMIX PROJECT

REMIX ADDRESSES THE ROOTS OF YOUTH VIOLENCE

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INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the Province of Ontario published *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence* report, written by the Honourable Roy McMurtry and Dr. Alvin Curling. The review is based on more than thirty years of research on the causes of violence, as well as interviews and discussions with over 750 people including government ministers, staff of not-for-profit organizations, the City of Toronto, public servants, and community members. The authors report that the main causes of violence amongst youth are:

- lack of a youth voice
- poverty
- issues in the education system
- racism
- lack of economic opportunity for youth
- health
- community design
- issues in the justice system.

The report concludes that “unless the roots of this violence are identified and addressed in a coordinated, collaborative and sustained way, violence will get worse” (*The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence, Volume 1, page 1*).

The Remix Project addresses all of the roots of youth violence highlighted in the report. Remix is a free six month training program for youth in the fields of creative arts, recording arts, photography, the art of film, and the art of business, where youth are mentored in achieving goals that will support them in developing a career in an industry they are passionate about.

This report is the result of six months of observations and interviews with The Remix Project staff, participants and graduates by an external research and evaluation consultant. It is the first in a series of documents that identifies and assesses the extent to which The Remix Project addresses the evidence-based risk and protective factors for positive youth development.
LACK OF A YOUTH VOICE

“The sense that many youth already have been alienated from society is reinforced when they do not have opportunities to be heard in areas that directly and immediately affect their lives. This can lead to a negative concept of self, a greater distrust of authority, a sense of powerlessness and a sense of exclusion from the broader community...youth and youth-led organizations are best-positioned to know what will work for other youth.” (Review of the Roots of Youth Violence, Volume 2, p. 14)

The Remix Project’s mission is to “help refine the raw talents of young people from across the GTA, in order to help them find success as they define it and on their own terms.” The program was developed for youth, by youth, to give them a voice in creating their futures. Many participants apply to Remix with a goal or project already in mind that they want to achieve, others create a project through discussions with their program leader at the beginning of the program. Examples of past projects include developing a website, starting a clothing line, recording an album, writing a book, creating a portfolio of photographs or other art, developing a business plan, and filming a documentary. Participants, along with their program leaders, create a six-month plan that outlines the steps they will take to achieve their goals, and are supported in accomplishing each step by staff and mentors.

Over 400 youth apply to The Remix Project each semester, for the opportunities it provides youth to develop a career in an industry that they are passionate about.

“The difference between Remix and school is that in school there is a curriculum you have to learn. Remix is like a suggestion box. They want you to do what you want to do and they’re going to nurture that skill. They push you and give you resources to better yourself.” Remix Graduate

“In high school you have to learn what they want to teach. At Remix, not only will they teach you skills you want to know, they also give you connections and resources to help in that field.” Remix Participant
LACK OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUTH

“There are many barriers for youth from disadvantaged communities who seek opportunities...Many youth lack role models to inspire them, or people who can help them prepare for an interview or deal with the early weeks on a job site. (Review of the Roots of Youth Violence, Volume 2, p. 14)

Remix’s project-based learning engages youth, and helps them develop essential skills that will prepare them for the workforce, including planning, marketing, critical thinking, collaborating, budgeting, researching, analyzing, and learning new information technology software (for example, Pro Tools). Several Remix graduates have become employees of the organization, including as program manager, program leader, studio assistant, and graphic designer. Others have found jobs through connections of the program, for example through their mentors, who provide work experiences and opportunities that connect youth to a network of professionals in the industry. Remix participants have gone on to become graphic designers, videographers, editors, publicists, social media experts, event managers, child and youth workers, professional recording artists, DJs, and much more.

Remix has also recently developed an innovative social enterprise called Blackboard Marketing, where Remix graduates are recruited for freelance work in a variety of creative industries. Within the first nine months of operating, Blackboard Marketing paid out over $10,000 to Remix graduates in graphic design, videography, and photography jobs. Blackboard currently has more than 20 clients, and companies range from small businesses to large corporations including TD Bank, Creative Niche, City of Toronto, EMI Canada, Yuk-Yuk’s, Mongrel Media, Ice Cube, Lamborghini Chicago, Sultan & Sakeba ISSA Family Foundation and more.

The Ontario Media Development Corporation reports that there are over 300,000 jobs in creative industries like film, television, music, books, magazines and active digital media that contribute $12.2 billion to Ontario’s economy. The Remix Project prepares youth for many of these jobs, including matching youth with mentors who introduce participants to the realities, complexities and processes of the industry. Participants also learn a variety of skills and information via regular workshops by professionals from external businesses and organizations, on topics including financial literacy, business ethics (resume writing, interviewing skills), branding and social media.

“Everybody needs a job and money. Remix provides a way to allow your hobbies to become your way of making money – an actual career. You can turn your passion into something profitable.” Remix Graduate

“Remix is respected within the community, so it gives you leverage. You’re more likely to get interview or an internship, and the chance to prove yourself.” Remix Graduate
POVERTY

“Poverty does not directly cause violent crime...But poverty without hope, poverty in isolation, poverty with hunger and poor living conditions, poverty with racism and poverty with numerous daily reminders of social exclusion can lead to the immediate risk factors for violence.” (Review of the Roots of Youth Violence, Volume 2, p. 7)

The link between education and poverty is clear, and Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Strategy (2011) highlights the importance of providing youth with educational opportunities and access to jobs in order to avoid or escape poverty. At The Remix Project, each participant works with their program leader and program manager to develop an exit strategy that includes:

- education (re-engagement with school or applying to college/university)
- internships or employment, or
- entrepreneurship

EDUCATION

High School Credits

The Remix Project works with the Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB) Equity Department, supporting youth in receiving credits for their time at Remix. Without these credits, some youth would not graduate from high school. The Canadian Council on Learning’s 2008 report titled The Cost Estimates of Dropping out of High School in Canada calculates that the lifetime savings in health, social, labour and employment costs of one person graduating from high school are over $300,000. In the past year alone, three Remix participants have gone back to high school and graduated, resulting in a potential cost savings of over $1 million.

Humber College Scholarships

The Remix Project supports youth in pursuing the ultimate path out of poverty; post-secondary education. Through a partnership with Humber College, three Remix participants per semester receive a scholarship.
JOBS

Internships and Work Experience

In today’s job market, a lack of experience can mean the difference between employment and unemployment. Remix participants have access to a number of real experiences in their chosen industry from one-off photo shoots, to editing a recording artist’s entire tour video, to full time intern for a clothing company.

Creating a Network of Industry Professionals

100% of participants reported that Remix provided them with resources and/or made connections with professionals from their industry. Participants felt that these connections will increase their chances of knowing about career opportunities and other work experience.

The Remix Project provides the opportunities needed by youth to help them succeed, and because it is free, it reduces barriers and increases access to education, training and job opportunities that help to level the playing field for marginalized youth. Remix also provides hope, with 23/24 (99%) participants reporting that they were more hopeful about their futures as a result of participating in the program.

“I got a ton of experience participating in the Remix Project. The support system at Remix was incredible. I built networks with so many talented, driven individuals and I’m leaving this with a whole new addition to my life of great people. Everyone was able to help me in so many different ways which got me a step closer to my goals.” Remix Participant

“Once you’re in Remix, even if you’re in poverty, you know that you’re working towards a place that can change that. People are grateful for this experience so they work hard.” Remix Graduate

“Even if you are poor, Remix shows you that there are things you can do to better yourself.” Remix Graduate
HEALTH

“Other health issues, such as mental health and substance abuse, can be viewed as direct roots of the immediate risk factors for violence involving youth, particularly alienation, impulsivity and no sense of belonging.” (Review of the Roots of Youth Violence, Volume 2, P. 13)

Good health depends on physical and mental well-being. Approximately one in five youth is dealing with anxiety and/or depression today, and millions of Canadians are unable to work due to mental health issues. These problems are often caused by negative emotions like fear and anxiety, and the body’s physiological reaction to stress.

Ongoing fear or stress in a young person’s life (an experience for many youth in priority neighbourhoods) causes cortisol (a stress hormone) to be released in the brain, which can have effects on physical and mental health. Cortisol is related to medical conditions like high blood pressure, arthritis and migraines, as well as psychological conditions like depression. When we experience positive emotions like interest and joy, it releases positive chemicals in the brain that can help counteract the effects of cortisol. For many young people, participating in the arts provides these positive experiences, and promotes their good health.

“Remix provides hope. It provides a positive and optimistic outlook for everyone. I’ve seen people cry tears of joy. All of a sudden you have a support system where everyone’s looking out for your genuine best interests. It can keep you sane, having that support system.” Remix Participant

“You can go through whatever you’re going through... when you come here and you start doing things and see the results. It helps you to the point that you’ll be happy, that you’ve done these things and you’re capable, which is a lot better than taking some pills.” Remix Graduate

“I’d be an incredibly lonely person if there were no Remix.” Remix Participant
ISSUES IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

“...students, families, communities and advocates have...continuously raised the issue of the absence of teachers who have the training to understand the particular nuances and struggles experienced by racialized children, and the lack of role models for their children. Seeing teachers and administrators from their own race and colour can help youth have the will to succeed and can give them hope in their ability to do so.” (Review of the Roots of Youth Violence, Volume 2, P. 10)

The Remix Project is an alternative learning program. Participants learn many of the subjects taught in mainstream education, in the context of something they’re passionate about. For example, as an audio engineer in the recording arts program, participants learn physics and math. The staff is made up of young adults from over 10 different ethnic backgrounds, so the youth see themselves reflected in the program leaders, mentors, support workers, and workshop facilitators.

“Another of the other major concerns about the education system in Ontario is the issue of the curriculum. Previous reports have noted that the curriculum is “largely reflective of European presence, settlement and development of Canada and as such provides little or no incentive for Black Canadians to develop pride in their African heritage” (Four-Level Government/African Canadian Community Working Group, 1992: 78). The same could easily be said about Aboriginal people.” (Review of the Roots of Youth Violence, Volume 2, page 11)

At the Remix Project, participants develop their own curriculum. The projects they choose at the beginning of the program are based on something they are passionate about, and they are surrounded by other young artists who are exploring other cultures as part of their projects. The Remix Project has partnerships with a number of organizations across the city and participants regularly attend and participate in cultural events throughout Toronto, including art shows, film premieres, and concerts.

“Teachers don’t generally care – you’re just another student in their class. Here at Remix they focus on only you, and what you want to do.” Remix Graduate

“Being here, you see the success of past participants – these are people you went to high school with, from the same communities – you see the people succeed and you know you can succeed. Everyone is coming from the same places and trying to go to the same places.” Remix Graduate

“Where teachers fail to care, Remix staff do.” Remix Graduate

“I never got along with my teachers because they couldn’t tell me things. They talked down to me, as if I had no say in the matter, which automatically creates animosity. At Remix, you can relate to the counsellors and staff because they’re interested in what you’re interested in. That makes you more productive.” Remix Graduate
FAMILY ISSUES

“Families can be divided, abusive, or struggling emotionally or financially. Some youth have no family. Without the support of a strong family, alienation, low self-esteem, lack of hope or empathy, impulsivity and other immediate risk factors for involvement with violence can set in and take old of a young person...” (Review of the Roots of Youth Violence, Volume 2, p. 12)

For many youth, The Remix Project becomes like a family to them. They have a program leader who provides guidance in identifying and achieving goals, a mentor who provides creative and engaging opportunities to explore an industry they are passionate about, peers who share their interests and aspirations, and support workers to help them deal with any struggles. The relationships are based on a love for a particular kind of culture, and as a result, are genuine and authentic.

“The only people that seem to understand me are my family at The Remix Project. They’re always there when I’m down.” Remix Participant

“I feel like even if things aren’t good at home, once you’re in the program, you’re adopted as part of this family, so your issues become less daunting. You know you have somebody else to lean on. There’s another grounding you have in the world aside from your biological family.” Remix Graduate

“The arts engaged me, but it’s the people who kept me here”. Remix Graduate
A major concern of those we met was the lack of anywhere for youth to go...This leaves youth with the greatest need for such facilities with no positive outlet for their energy and time, no space for facilities for creative self-expression and no place that fosters contact with coaches and other positive mentors.” (Review of the Roots of Youth Violence, Volume 2, pp. 9-10)

The Remix Project provides a safe and supportive environment where youth can go every weekday, and where they are engaged in creative activities, workshops and events. The building is modern and has state-of-the-art technology and equipment, and is staffed by positive role models who understand the challenges of marginalized youth. Located in downtown Toronto, in one of the hubs of the creative industries, the program provides a place outside of any of the neighbourhoods where there have historically been territorial divides, and is open to youth from anywhere in the GTA.

“Remix participants come here from many areas. You can come from wherever you come from and be safe.” Remix Graduate

“Remix is a place where you can come no matter what’s going on in your life and find the support you need”. People here care about you, what’s happening with you and are here to help you.” Remix Graduate

“Remix shows you that there’s a bigger world outside of your neighbourhood. When you come to Remix you see what you can be. Program leaders come from the same type of environment as you and you can see their growth, professionalism and maturity. You can gauge your transition from now until the future when you’re their age. You don’t need to be part of what you see in your neighbourhood.” Remix Graduate
RACISM

“Race has nothing to do with violence. No race is inherently more violent than another...Racism strikes at the core of self-identity, eats away the heart and casts a shadow on the soul...The very real potential for this to create the immediate risk factors should not be hard to understand. How can it not erode your self-esteem to feel that, no matter what you do or what you achieve, you can be excluded or undervalued simply because of your race?” (Review of the Roots of Youth Violence, Volume 2, p. 8).

From program leaders, to mentors, to support workers and workshop facilitators, The Remix Project is diverse. Participants are a mix of youth, many of whom are from Toronto’s priority neighbourhoods. Participants are exposed to a variety of people from different industries and backgrounds who serve as positive role models. Individual projects allow participants to explore a topic that they choose, for example, a participant in the photography program developing a portfolio of pictures to showcase Islamic lifestyle.

“If you know your history you can plan the rest of your future. I haven’t felt connected to my culture. Remix provided me with an opportunity to explore my culture through photography.” Remix Participant

“Remix is Toronto in a nutshell; everyone is from different backgrounds, and when you get in, you understand there are a whole bunch of people with similar struggles to you.” Remix Participant
ISSUES IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Issues in the Justice System
“The sad reality is that if police stops or interventions are done discriminatorily or aggressively or in a degrading manner, or if youth are belittled in court or harassed while in custody, a deep sense of grievance and frustration can result. Where it does, a youth’s self-esteem and sense of belonging or hope are undercut. Alienation and a sense of unfairness and oppression can easily follow.” (Review of the Roots of Youth Violence, Volume 1, p. 77)

Many youth who come to The Remix Project have been involved with the criminal justice system. The Remix Project provides an alternative to that lifestyle where youth are supported in accomplishing goals that improve their self-esteem. Among the youth who contributed to this report, those that had been arrested before starting the program reported that they had not been in trouble since. They indicated that the opportunity to spend time at The Remix Project working on their individual projects, attending workshops, meeting with program leaders, and spending time with mentors, means that they have fewer opportunities to be involved with negative activities.

“Remix gave me something to keep me occupied; something that I’m passionate about. I wouldn’t have the chance to go back to those bad things.” Remix Participant

“You have to keep yourself occupied. If you’re here for 6 hours a day then you can’t be out there. The devil finds work for idle hands”. Remix Graduate
CONCLUSION

The Remix Project was developed by a group of youth who shared a love of the arts and culture, and who wanted space for youth to get together to develop skills and talents, learn from successful members of their community, and develop a network of professionals in an industry they are passionate about. Although it was not intended as a violence prevention program, it just happens that providing youth with these kinds of authentic, creative and engaging experiences, guided by supportive leaders who are a part of the same culture, provides the foundation for positive youth development including preventing violence.

If you are not poor, have a good education, have access to skills training, have grown up in a healthy environment with positive role models and access to cultural and recreational activities, you are not likely to be violent. Unfortunately not all youth have these positive experiences, and rather than be punished for being born into difficult circumstances, youth need opportunities that foster their skills and talents. By giving youth the tools, resources and networks that will support them in becoming successful and productive citizens, The Remix Project shows them the right way, rather than criminalizing them for going the wrong way. The Remix Project is a revolutionary approach to preventing violence that is evidence-based and effective.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

The evidence for the risk factors for violence has been well established by several decades of research by leading national and international experts and organizations including The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence report, as well as the World Health Organization (Violence Prevention: The Evidence), The WAVE Trust (Violence and What to do About it), Dr. Bruce Perry (Maltreatment and the Developing Child), and Dr. Jack Shankoff, The Harvard Centre for the Developing Child (From Neurons to Neighbourhoods).

In his book Less Law, More Order: The Truth About Reducing Crime, Irvin Waller of the Institute for the Prevention of Crime, concluded that governments and other funders should invest in “programs that target at-risk situations and that have been proven to prevent crime, such as those that: Provide enriched services to youth at risk of social problems by increasing their inclusion, involvement in pro-social activities and job training.” By addressing the risk factors, The Remix Project has the potential to significantly reduce violence.

“We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”
Albert Einstein
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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