

7-2013

## Newsletter (Acting Together (AT-CURA))

Acting Together (AT-CURA)

Gira Bhatt

*Kwantlen Polytechnic University*

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### KORA Citation

Acting Together (AT-CURA) and Bhatt, Gira, "Newsletter (Acting Together (AT-CURA))" (2013). KORA *Acting Together (AT-CURA) - SSHRC-CURA Project*: Paper 6.  
<http://kora.kpu.ca/at-cura/6>

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2013 Newsletter

Volume 3 Issue 1

# Acting Together

COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ALLIANCE PROJECT

PREVENTION OF  
YOUTH GANG  
INVOLVEMENT



**acting  
together**

SSHRC-CURA PROJECT

ACTINGTOGETHER.CA

Research

Governance

Training and Education

Knowledge Dissemination



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada





“The Acting Together: Community-University Research Alliance project is a poster child for university/ community engagement: its work is important, relevant and inspiring. It reflects everything that KPU aspires to be, and we are proud to lead this collaboration with our partner institutions and community agencies.”

**Dr. Alan Davis, KPU President and Vice-Chancellor**

“Given that crime reduction is one of the four key areas of focus for the City of Surrey, we view our partnership with the Acting Together Community-University Research Alliance as a key component in assisting us as we move forward in our efforts to develop partnerships, seek solutions to root causes of crime, and to ultimately bring together all stakeholders in our shared goal of ensuring a safe, healthy and vibrant community.”

**Mayor Dianne Watts, City of Surrey**



“Building partnerships is one of the most important goals we have at Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit -BC. We partner with 14 law enforcement agencies to combat organized crime and gang violence in our province. Extending those partnerships beyond law enforcement to organizations such as Acting-Together, CURA project at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, is invaluable to CFSEU-BC as they assist us with understanding the root causes of gang and organized crime violence.”

**Dan Malo, Chief Officer, CFSEU-BC**

“South Asian Community Coalition Against Youth Violence (SACCAYV) is dedicated to preventing youth violence and keeping our young people on the right track. In this context, SACCAYV and AT-CURA are a perfect fit. It brings together community experience and academic research in a very unique and productive manner.”

**Balwant Sanghera, Chair, SACCAYV**



Message from the Project Director  
Dr. Gira Bhatt

A common tendency in addressing the issue of youth violence is to examine those whose lives take a turn for the worse and who end up getting into trouble with their family, school, neighborhood, and the community at large. Questions immediately surface. What went wrong? Bad parenting? Wrong kind of friends? School system? Society not doing enough? For decades, researchers have also focused on identifying risk factors that make youth vulnerable to negative influences.

Although there is a certain value in understanding factors that make youth vulnerable and render them at risk for anti-social and destructive behavior, what has remained relatively neglected is the examination of youth who negotiate their adolescent years relatively well. This group may include the overachievers and stars of extracurricular activities, but the majority of them are moving through their teen years without any spectacular demonstration of any particular talent, academic or extracurricular. They are simply staying the course, and regardless of their background, they all have one thing in common: when faced with tempting or difficult life choices, they have made wise decisions.

How come?

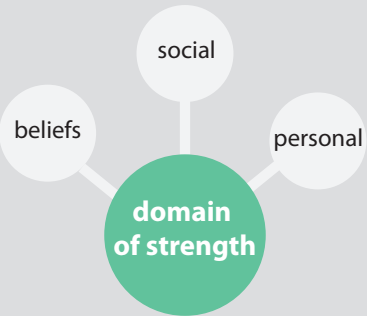
This is the context of our project Acting Together, which is the hub for the community of researchers, teachers, parents, youth, service agencies, law-enforcement agencies, popular media, and policy makers. The goal is to identify protective factors, the kind that would armor youth with character strengths, social connections, and a cognitive frame for making wise decisions to stay away from the path of violence, drugs, and criminal gangs. Strategies rooted in strong evidence-based research for prevention of youth violence and gang-involvement would make sense for policy and funding decisions to support community initiatives.

The project is now in year five of its five-year term (2009-2014). Our collective commitments and efforts have made it possible to stay on track with all the performance markers. These include research, training workshops, community events, and academic and popular dissemination of project activities and outcomes. The highpoint of our journey together will be the AT-CURA capstone conference in July 2014.

I am happy to share that in view of the success of our collaborative project, our federal funding agency Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) has granted us an extension of one more year. I remain confident that the momentum generated through the project will continue to inspire future goals.



Focus on Youth Strengths and Modifiable Protective Factors



Dr. Roger Tweed is the lead researcher of the Powerful Teens Study



AT-CURA undergraduate research assistants helped with the Powerful Teens Study. From Left: Brooke Knowlton, Daniel Nacordia, Amber Rothwell, Isabel Scheuneman Scott, Sara Lewis, Samantha Lim, Eric Mah



Dr. Roger Tweed illustrates the strength-based approach to youth violence prevention at the Chris Mohan Memorial Event.

The Powerful Teens Study

Earlier in this project, some members of our team travelled around B.C. asking youth workers about youth strengths. In particular, we asked these workers to name the strengths they strive to build in kids. We asked them to focus on strengths that help kids resist violence. We heard many impassioned reports about building self-esteem, confidence, and connections to positive activities. These have value. However, we heard less about building these positive traits that may also help kids resist involvement in violence and build satisfying lives.

In a survey of 421 youth in Grade 8 we found preliminary evidence that youth who score high on authenticity (being true to oneself) , gratitude, and humility were either less likely to engage in violence or less likely to think that violence is justified as a tool for influencing others.

The findings are consistent with our idea that helping kids build character strengths such as authenticity, gratitude, and humility will not only make them happier, but also might reduce violence. We don’t want to take away from other efforts to help kids, such as efforts to build self-esteem or involve youth in positive activities. In fact, we found that kids can have all these character strengths and while still having high self-esteem (i.e., perceiving themselves as valuable and good). Also, both character strengths and self-esteem were associated with fewer beliefs justifying violence. The results are still preliminary; we have more data being gathered. Nonetheless, the results deserve attention.

Number Crunching for the Powerful Teens Study

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Participating high schools   | 4   |
| Meetings with 4 school administrators, 4 principals, 28 teachers           | 23  |
| Class visits by the research team (Time 1: 28 classes; Time 2: 28 Classes) | 56  |
| Days of data collection  | 28  |
| Standardized test measures   | 24  |
| Pages of the survey questionnaire  | 22  |
| Total questions/items in the survey  | 404 |
| Minutes on average to complete the survey                                  | 45  |
| Student research assistants: 14 Undergraduate (Kwantlen), 1 MA (SFU)       | 15  |
| Pizzas served to participating 8th grade classes (\$2.80 per student)      | 377 |
| iPods raffled to participating 8th grade classes (\$194.54 each)           | 11  |
| Gift cards to participating 8th grade teachers (\$25 each)                 | 86  |
| Total Incentive payment \$9,060  |     |

Preliminary Results of the Powerful Teens Survey (Total Participants = 421)

Top 7 Character Strengths of Youth (out of the listed 24) selected by youth as “Describes me best”

| Selected by % of Youth |              |       |
|------------------------|--------------|-------|
| 1                      | Humor        | 58.1% |
| 2                      | Love         | 45.9% |
| 3                      | Honesty      | 44.9% |
| 4                      | Teamwork     | 44.8% |
| 5                      | Kindness     | 41.6% |
| 6                      | Creativity   | 39.1% |
| 7                      | Thankfulness | 30.3% |

| Item Selected by                       |                 |            |
|--|-----------------|------------|
| Risks/Costs of being in a gang         | Number of Youth | % of Youth |
| I would get into trouble with police   | 322             | 84.1%      |
| I would get killed                     | 318             | 82.8%      |
| I would get into trouble with parents  | 317             | 82.8%      |
| I would get hurt                       | 314             | 82.0%      |
| I would lose my non-gang friends       | 292             | 76.4%      |
| I would feel guilty                    | 289             | 75.5%      |
| I would get into trouble with teachers | 280             | 73.3%      |

| Item Selected by                |                 |            |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Benefits of being in a gang     | Number of Youth | % of Youth |
| I would be protected            | 81              | 21.3%      |
| I would get money               | 52              | 13.7%      |
| I would be part of a family     | 36              | 9.5%       |
| I would fit into a group better | 30              | 7.9%       |
| I would have excitement         | 29              | 7.6%       |
| I would be “cool”               | 29              | 7.6%       |
| I would feel successful         | 17              | 4.5%       |

What do Youth Know about the Risks/Benefits of Gang-involvement?

- 73.2% of youth do not see a lot of benefits to being in a gang
- 26.8% believe that there are some benefits to being in a gang
- 4.7% believe that there are no risks/costs to being in a gang





SFU research team from left: Michelle Collins, Dr. Jodi Viljoen, Dr. Kevin Douglas, Catherine Shaffer, and Andrew Gray

### The Youth Power Study: Mapping the Strengths of At-Risk Youth

Following the Powerful Teens Study involving 421 high school students, a new study was launched in December 2012 focusing on at-risk youth. The goal of the Youth Power Study is to identify character strengths of at-risk youth and to also assess how these strengths are used or misused by these youth. AT-CURA's partner Pacific Community Resources Society (PCRS) has provided generous support. Michelle Shaw, the PCRS manager of Guildford Youth Resource Services, and Michel Pouliot, the PCRS manager of Newton Youth Resource Center, gave a guided tour of the Guildford facility of their youth drop-in centre to SFU researchers Dr. Jodi Viljoen and Dr. Kevin Douglas, and to Kwantlen researchers Dr. Roger Tweed, Dr. Gira Bhatt, Steve Dooley, and Dr. Nathalie Gagnon. Simon Fraser University graduate students Catherine Shaffer and Andrew Gray and the study manager Michelle Collins are assisting with the research.



Indira Prahst, Langara College

### Seduced into Gangs: Youth Alienation Study

The AT-CURA Co-investigator Indira Prahst from the partner institute Langara College has been leading a qualitative research project. The goal of the Youth Alienation Study is to examine the extent and types of alienation that youth may be experiencing and how that may be related to their vulnerability to joining gangs and drug-related crimes. Two undergraduate research assistants Lydia Ng and Sandip Rakhra, and one PhD student from University of British Columbia, Prabhsharabir Singh, have been assisting with the study.

The study has found that:

- Youth are feeling more disconnected from their families and forging bonds with gangs to replace the loss of connectedness with family.
- With the intersecting effects of mass technology, glorification of gangs and a more consumer-oriented society, youth are feeling more estranged from themselves. This has placed youth in a more vulnerable situation of intensified needs, desires and outlets making gang life more seductive to join.

The findings have been disseminated to the public in creative ways through the media including in the Asian Journal, Indo-Canadian Voice, Georgia Straight, CBC Radio and OMNI Television.



Inspiring speakers at the Youth Forum which engaged 72 high school students. From left: Tim Collins (Assistant Manager of TD Bank, Vancouver main branch), Dr. Lisa Monchalin (Criminologist), Derek Woo (Student)

### Project Youth-to-Youth Violence: Voices of Fraser Health Authority Nurses and Emergency Room Social Workers

by Sandra Alfonso

In 2009, a forum was held at BC Children's Hospital (BCCH) on youth-to-youth violence. This forum represented collaboration between BCCH emergency staff, social workers, Kwantlen nursing faculty, and AT-CURA. The project was led by Judy Lee, Kwantlen's Nursing program coordinator and faculty with a goal of the publication of three resource booklets on youth violence: one each for youth, parents, and service providers. These booklets are available to the public on the BCCH website.

Following the success of this collaborative project, a similar project has been launched under the leadership of Judy Lee for the Fraser Health region. The goal of this project is to explore available resources and follow-up protocols to assist young victims and their families who come to the hospital emergency room as a result of youth-to-youth violence. In collaboration with AT-CURA, focus groups and interviews have been conducted at several locations including New Westminster Health Unit, Tri-Cities Health Unit, Youth Clinic of the Surrey Memorial Hospital (SMH), Langley Health Unit, Burnaby Youth Clinic, and the SMH emergency. The participants are the youth clinic nurses across the Fraser Health region and the emergency room social workers of the SMH. The transcriptions of the interviews and focus groups are being analyzed under the supervision of Dr. Diane Symonds, a member of Kwantlen's nursing faculty. Lauren Greer and Eryn Moor, Kwantlen's nursing students, and Amerdeep Sall, a graduate student from SFU, are assisting with the data analysis. The aim of the project is to publish a resource booklet for SMH, akin to the report published for the BCCH. This resource booklet will be available to FHA emergency room social workers and youth clinic nurses who attend to the youth and their family members following the incident of youth-to-youth violence.



Judy Lee presenting the highlights of the Youth-to-Youth Violence project at the Fraser Health Authority's Nursing Theme Day.



Judy Lee, Kwantlen Nursing program coordinator and faculty member, is the lead for the Youth-to-Youth Violence project for BCCH and FHA.



Sandra Alfonso is AT-CURA's Network Coordinator.



Catherine Parlee provides valuable support to AT-CURA on behalf of the KPU Office of Research & Scholarship.





Steve Dooley is the AT-CURA lead for the qualitative study *Voices of the Community*. Through ongoing focus groups, interviews, and meetings with community members, AT-CURA's team has been walking the talk of the community engagement.

Community Engagement: Acting Together to Address Youth Violence

by Steve Dooley

The project Acting Together has provided an opportunity to walk side by side with our community partners to address youth violence with passion, commitment and authenticity. AT-CURA is grounded in the principles of applied community development and engagement. We value inclusion, the recognition of divergent perspectives and points of views, and, most importantly, we value the knowledge that addressing youth violence requires a team approach in which the community comes together, rolls up its sleeves and works together to identify solutions that work. We recognize that to be effective we must develop approaches to youth violence that have community buy-in and build community capacity.

There is much to be learned when the community and academic institutions work together as an authentic partnership team. In this sense we have seen that a true partnership cannot dichotomize the ‘community’ and the ‘academic’. We are truly working together as one interwoven unit. So, when we brought the academics and the community together, we found that it worked!

In our initial meetings with community members, we learned that they were getting tired of hearing about all the bad news. They felt some cultural segments of the community were being tarnished by the negative light and they wanted to begin the process of moving forward in a more positive way. We decided therefore to focus our research on the strengths of youth that would act as protective factors in preventing youth from engaging in violence. The community also helped us identify the strengths of youth that we needed to explore. For example, they suggested we examine “authenticity” as a strength, and sure enough this was identified as an important factor in our research.

As a community, we have learned a great deal about the prevention of youth violence and we know that any new prevention program on the horizon will be sustainable in the arms of broad community support.

An Ongoing Connection with the Community

|                   | Focus Groups | Interviews |
|-------------------|--------------|------------|
| Youth             | 3 (N=16)     | 31         |
| Teachers          | 1 (N=4)      |            |
| Service providers | 4 (N=21)     | 7          |
| Parents           | 4 (N=19)     | 7          |



Academic and community partners working together at an AT-CURA steering committee meeting. (From left) Dr. Kevin Douglas (SFU), Katherine Peterson (SD36), Harpal Johl (DIVERSEcity), Ninu Kang (SACCAYV/MOSAIC), Rochelle Ivany (SD36).

AT-CURA Hosts Program Evaluation Workshop

AT-CURA in partnership with Centre for Interdisciplinary Research: Community Learning and Engagement (CIR:CLE) and the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) hosted a Community Program Evaluation workshop Nov 15, 2012. Co-Investigator Dr. Nathalie Gagnon led and facilitated the workshop along with co-facilitators Steve Dooley (CIR:CLE) and Alison Warner (NCPC). Fourty participants attended from 14 agencies, including the City of Surrey, two school districts, and a range of community non-profit organizations. Participants learned skills in program evaluation including use of logic models, evaluation designs, and data and performance modeling.



Steve Dooley and Dr. Nathalie Gagnon leading the workshop participants through the Program Evaluation steps.



Alison Warner, of the National Crime Prevention Centre, co-facilitated the Program Evaluation workshop.

Engaging the Community, Policymakers and Law-Enforcement on Youth Violence Issues

On Sept. 28, 2012, AT-CURA partner South Asian Community Coalition Against Youth Violence (SACCAYV), in collaboration with MOSAIC and AT-CURA, hosted a roundtable lunch discussion, *In-Dialogue*. The event brought the community together to address the issue of youth gang violence. The event was attended by politicians, the RCMP, academics, community stakeholders, students, and community service agency representatives. The keynote speaker was Chief Officer Dan Malo, Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit (CFSEU)–BC



Chief Officer Dan Malo, CFSEU-BC sharing a lighter moment with the community at the *In-Dialogue* event.

Open Letter from a Former Gangster

My life probably started out much like yours. I grew up in a middle class suburb, with parents who earned above-average incomes. I played sports, was popular, and generally did everything that regular suburban middle class kids do. In school, I had some minor behavioural issues but nothing that could have foreshadowed what was to come for me. I grew up and became a “gangster.” I don’t like using the term “gangster” as it carries the connotation of respect in our ever-changing pop culture, but for the sake of familiarity, I will use it here now.

My slippery slope started right after high school. I was attending college and had become quite bored with academic pursuits. As a result, I began to associate myself with some people I had met who seemed to have it all going for them. I was introduced to a world of fast money, violence, greed and betrayal. I became infatuated with this lifestyle, as it seemed like these people had the perfect life. They never went to school or work, had money to burn and were feared by most ordinary people they came across. Before I knew it, I was hooked.

I immersed myself in the drug world and was completely motivated by my greed and my hunger for money, respect, and power. This new lifestyle led me down a road to ruin that I still have not been able to completely come back from. The violence I experienced, both as the victim and the perpetrator, will stay with me in my most lucid dreams forever. I watched as these men turned on each other, often at the drop of a nickel. Where was all that love and brotherhood I’d been promised? Quickly, the money I had amassed disappeared on partying, drugs and debts incurred from lost drug shipments, failed business ventures and violent robberies. After six long years, two stretches in prison, and enough bad memories for a lifetime, I finally decided a change was sorely needed. I was sick of prison, sick of the police, sick of my family and friends turning their backs on me but most of all, I felt I could no longer look at myself in the mirror.

After prison, I began reconnecting with my family who stuck by me throughout the entire process in a meaningful way. I cut out all my old associations and began working a full-time job, something I had never really done before. I finished my parole and enrolled in university to study psychology in hopes of obtaining a degree and a career where these experiences could be useful to others who are getting pulled in just as I had.

Fast forward three years later and I am finishing my second year of a Bachelor’s degree program with my sights set on Master’s and doctoral studies. I still work a full time job, am engaged and have a new title I’m very proud of: homeowner.

When I look back at my life in my early twenties, it seems like a bad dream that I somehow managed to wake up from. Unfortunately, too many young people are not waking up. This gang problem involves us all as the reach of its horrors knows no bounds. Right now, your son could be meeting these people, your daughter could be dating them, or they could be sitting next to you as you read this in a busy coffee shop. Its reach is infinite. These aren’t meant to be scare tactics but a wakeup call for all of us. I am one of the very lucky; I had the support that enabled me to make a change and, unfortunately, many don’t. This is why this project is so important: it allows us to analyze not only what kids believe about surrounding gangs, but also the strengths of the kids who don’t get involved so we can better understand how to educate our youth and break down these misconceptions.

If you’re reading this and have mixed feelings about gang involvement, don’t hesitate to contact the project. In the end, all the luster of this life will be stripped away, and all that will be left is its ugly core.



At-Risk Youth Grow Vegetables in the Community Garden

by **Nancy Green**, Youth Diversity Liaison for the Surrey School District’s WRAP program

Through the generous contributions of AT-CURA, the Surrey WRAP Program was able to provide 22 at-risk high school students in the Surrey School District with meaningful summer activity at the Surrey Organic Community Garden. This was a wonderful environment in which the youth were able to learn about ecological awareness and environmentally friendly lifestyles. This was a unique experience for the students to work with their hands in nature. Taking students into a natural environment to bond with case managers outside of the school and creating ownership of a space in the community was a powerful experience. Importantly, the project provided employment skills and income for the youth who tend to come from low-income families and who struggle to find meaningful employment.

In the spring, the youth prepared the garden by enriching the soil, turning it, utilizing aeration methods, weeding, removing rocks, and planning spacing and types of produce to be grown. The summer months were spent tending the garden, watering, weeding and cultivating. In the fall, the students spent their time in the garden learning and putting into practice composting, identifying plants needing to be pulled, digging up roots and conducting tool maintenance.

The students were able to take some of the food produce to their families. Many who would not have had Halloween pumpkins were able to take one from the garden for their families. A number of students were not previously aware of how some of these foods looked in their natural state, or how to prepare the foods they grew. The knowledge around the processes of food production, labor requirements and uses for the various foods provided powerful lessons around interconnectedness. An added benefit was the connecting of the students to other members of the garden by demonstrating, informing and sharing knowledge of organic practices. The great interest from the gardening community members in the students and their work in the garden provided the students with additional assistance and mentorship.

Overall, the program has been a highly successful addition to WRAP project strategies in preventing and intervening in young lives with positive, pro-social experiences. In the end, the students had an experience they can proudly add to their resumes for future employment.



A vegetable patch at the Surrey Community Garden, which was tended by WRAP youth of Surrey School District.



“The support and partnership of AT-CURA in the development of the Community Garden Project has been invaluable. The Community Garden has allowed students throughout the Surrey School District to gain relevant and necessary employment skills while offering an urban oasis to rest and reflect. The Surrey School District appreciates and values the partnership and collaboration of AT-CURA in the support of student development.”

Rob Rai, Manager, Surrey Safe Schools Department



**This should never happen again:  
Chris Mohan Memorial Youth &  
Parents Forum**

The innocent life of young Christopher Mohan was taken in a tragic gang shooting. His grieving mother, Eileen Mohan, organized a forum on May 26, 2012 for parents and youth in collaboration with AT-CURA, City of Surrey, Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit, Surrey RCMP, Surrey School District, Vancouver Sun, CIBC, and TD Bank. Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts opened the event, “We know that early intervention is essential, so we need to engage youth and their parents about the warning signs and deadly consequences of gang activity.”

“Innocent life should never be taken. We must always choose life before death”, Eileen Mohan said at the parents’ forum hosted in memory of her late son Christopher Mohan.



**AT-CURA Attended the Fifth Annual Gangs & Guns Training Symposium**



AT-CURA students, researchers, and network coordinator at the display booth. From left: Jordan Buna, Sandy Alfonso, Luisa Piraquive-Buitrago, Sara Lewis, Dr. Gira Bhatt and Dr. Roger Tweed



RCMP Const. Frank Grosspietsch, a Firearms Investigation Support Specialist, demonstrated a variety of dangerous weapons confiscated from gangsters.

**AT-CURA at the KPU Open House**

*What are your character strengths?*

The AT-CURA crew remained busy with an interactive exercise for the KPU Open House visitors.



Brooke Knowlton, an AT-CURA student assistant, received the *KPU President's Outstanding Graduate Award*.

“I believe that the contributions I have made to the community as part of the AT-CURA team allowed me to be the strongest contender for the award.”



Sarah Jackson, AT-CURA's Media Editor completed her journalism degree at KPU and has moved to New York to take on the position of Associate Producer of MSNBC's *Hardball with Chris Matthews*.



Rob Rai, manager of the Safe Schools Department of the Surrey School District received the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for his focus on and longtime dedication toward the care and protection of the District's 70,000 students. BC Premier Christy Clark presented the medal.




Charan Gill, CEO of PICS, is the recipient of KPU's Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree, Spring 2013.




Isabel Scheuneman Scott, an AT-CURA student assistant received a SSHRC Graduate Scholarship and will join the Criminology Master's program at the Ottawa University




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South Asian Community  
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South Asian Student  
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The Indo-Canadian Voice



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