

Youth At Risk in Winnipeg: Multiple Disadvantages, Public Safety, and the Policy Agenda

A research paper prepared for the October 17th, 2026 Youth at Risk Conference at Canadian Mennonite University

Integrated Intervention and Prevention of At-Risk Youth

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1. Summary

Youth at risk in Winnipeg has been a growing and persistent concern among schools, families and communities for decades, while the core issues leading to at-risk youth have been largely under-reported, mischaracterized and unresolved. To be clear, youth at risk are not youth who are risks, but rather youth who are experiencing a combination of negative factors that may harm their future potential. The factors harming youth can be prevented through policy change, and giving youth from all backgrounds equal opportunity to thrive is not just necessary, but essential for the future of Manitoba.

Manitoban and Canadian youth alike, according to many commentators especially in the post-pandemic landscape, have been feeling less socially capable, less happy, less present in schools, and at higher risk for mental health issues and suicide (Falkenberg et al., 2024; Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, 2023). As of May, 2026, according to UNICEF, Canada ranks 22nd out of 37 peer countries in child and youth well-being, while statistics in Manitoba remain below the Canadian average in youth proximity to poverty, drugs and mental health risks (UNICEF Canada, 2026). Chronic absenteeism is a core concern in the conversation surrounding youth at risk. Local activists and community organizations, such as Inner City Youth Alive, have been reaching out to education ministers and trustee staff for answers since at least 2017. More recently, media outlets have also been probing the data on absenteeism, exploring the often shocking numbers and underwhelming responses from school trustees and government. The public has begun to get engaged and the priority of school attendance has been rising due in part to initiatives like the ICYA production of the 2025 documentary, *Absent*, and the April 2026 Winnipeg School Division Student Absenteeism Summit.

This paper provides background data to inform discussion at the October 17, 2026 Youth At Risk conference hosted by Canadian Mennonite University, Massey College, and Inner City Youth Alive. We have examined not only the situation in Manitoba and Canada but also solutions outside of Manitoba, such as the Netherlands' success with peer-to-peer counseling, and Japan's ability to mitigate high rates of chronic absenteeism. The October 17 Youth at Risk conference will discuss policy recommendations suggested by expert panels, decision-makers and the audience in attendance and this paper aims to contribute to this effort by assessing areas of action for school boards, the federal government, the Province, municipal governments, and the community at large. Our recommendations are not exhaustive, but they include policy recommendations in the areas of public safety, the need to highlight mental health challenges, and in particular, chronic absenteeism, with the necessity for sufficient human and financial resources for tracking, investigating, responding and acting when students are absent across all school divisions. They have been organized in Appendix A as options for the four working groups the October 17 conference plans to convene to prioritize action.

1.1 Youth at Risk and Youth Offenders

For an accurate representation of data and for a pragmatic plan of action, differentiating youth at risk from 'young offenders' is crucial. Statistics Canada (2007) assesses youth as individuals aged 15 to 24 years old. **Youth at risk are early teenagers to young adults who exist under circumstances that increase the likelihood that they will engage in delinquent or criminal activity due to cumulative deprivation** (Canadian Public Health Association, n.d.). A young offender in section 2 of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (2002) is referred to as a young person who "appears to be twelve years old or older, but less than eighteen years old and, if the context requires, includes any person who is charged under this Act with having committed an

offence while he or she was a young person or who is found guilty of an offence under this Act.” Youth at risk are not exclusively youth offenders and should not be treated as such. Instead, a proper plan of action involves a widespread societal understanding of the distinction, preventative measures to avoid offences being committed, and avoiding reactionary measures once minor offences occur. This will help to destigmatize disadvantaged youth and help bolster a society-wide perspective of youth reintegration and policy reform.

1.2 Cultural Considerations

Addressing youth at risk must include the special challenges faced by Indigenous youth. The Winnipeg School Division Student Absentee Summit report noted that “Indigenous students experience disproportionate barriers (accessing school) due to historical and ongoing systemic inequities” (Winnipeg School Division, 2026). In 2024 across Canada, Indigenous youth represented a 40% share of all incarcerated persons in juvenile detention centers (Department of Justice Canada, 2024). The conclusion to this data must factor the troubling consequences of systematic oppression and cultural erasure that Indigenous adults and youth experience (Scott, 2026; UNESCO, 2023; Southern Chiefs' Organization Inc., 2026).

While issues surrounding the topic affect Indigenous youth disproportionately, proactive solutions require acknowledgment of Canada’s entire multicultural background that include young people from all races, regions, and ethnicities. Winnipeg’s demographic census shows that over 100 languages are spoken in the city, with Cree, Ojibway, Tagalog, German and Punjabi representing the largest minorities after English and French (Statistics Canada, 2023). Community safety, school resources including VET, mental health, and addictions counselling must remain accessible for all youth. Any implemented policy surrounding youth at risk must also include language accessibility and cultural consideration.

2. Landscape of Youth at Risk

Manitoba reports a child poverty rate of roughly 27%, compared with a national average of 18% (Campaign 2000 Manitoba, 2026). This indicates that more than one-quarter of children in Manitoba live in low-income circumstances. Limited or unstable access to basic needs may interact with other risk factors affecting mental health, substance use, school attendance and educational achievement. These conditions are relevant to discussion of cumulative disadvantage and of policy responses for youth facing multiple barriers.

2.1 Risk: Mental Health and Drug Use

As of 2023, 9.4% of Manitoban youth reported experiencing suicidal thoughts (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2026), 10% of Manitoba's youth deaths in the 2024-25 year were attributed to mental health and addiction (Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, 2025). In order to ensure youth prosperity, Manitoba must act to address the youth mental health challenges that are heavily contributing to the youth at risk problem. According to Winnipeg Fire Paramedic Service data, drug-related calls for youth have doubled from 2016 to 2025, increasing from 24 to more than 45 calls per month over the past decade (Hempel, 2026). Of the top ten problems youth in Manitoba reported facing in 2021, substance abuse was number one followed by mental health (Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth, 2021). Manitoba is limited in the scope of access to services. Mental health resources fell to the bottom of average margins in Canada, with 21.7 psychologists per 100,000 people, less than half the national average of 53.5 per 100,000. Only 15% of psychologists in Manitoba were operating in the public sector (Canadian Psychological Association, 2025). Without access to adequate mental health care and resources for addictions, the youth of Manitoba are struggling, and it is reflective of the increased rates of violence and student absenteeism.

2.2 Risk: Chronic Absenteeism

Across Canada, chronic absenteeism has become an important issue affecting youth well-being and educational participation, with increases reported in Ontario, Quebec and Manitoba between 2019 and 2026 (Dayan-Perez, 2026). A commonly used threshold defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10% of instructional time (Youth Mental Health Canada, n.d.). Winnipeg School Division reported that roughly 9% of its students were severely chronically absent in the 2024-25 school year, similar to reporting for 2023-24 (Winnipeg School Division, 2025). Separately, 38.9% of Manitobans aged 18-24 are attending postsecondary education, compared with a national average of 50.2% (Statistics Canada, n.d.). Winnipeg School Division leaders were discussing absenteeism as early as 2017 (Nickel, 2017), demonstrating that the issue predates the pandemic. The persistence of absenteeism raises questions about both the effectiveness of past responses and the underlying barriers affecting regular school attendance.

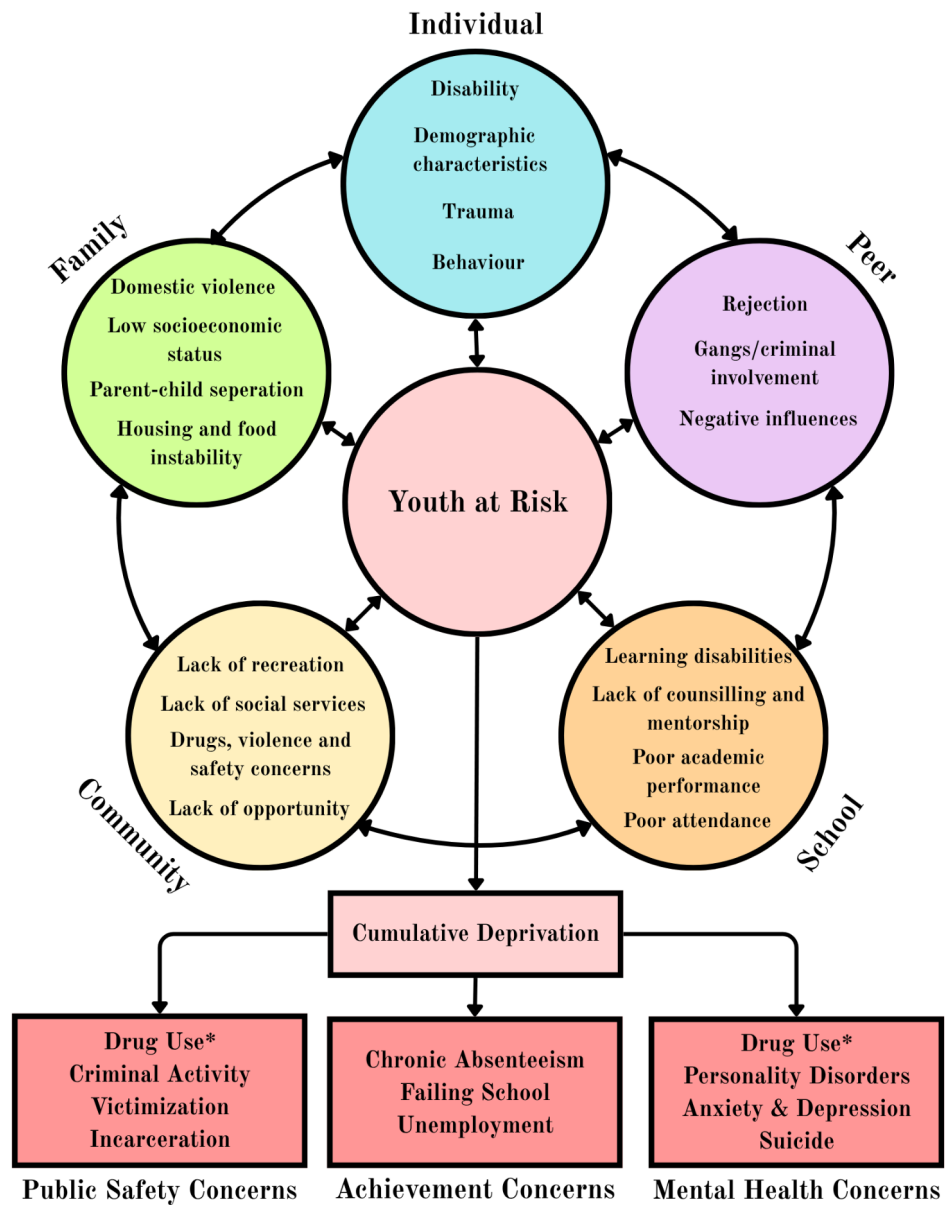
2.3 Risk: Educators

In a 2026 survey commissioned by The Manitoba Teachers' Society, 70% of Manitoba teachers reported an increase in violence over the course of their careers, and 61% reported an increase in the severity of violence experienced. Respondents described a "...cumulative effect on student well-being..." and "the need for earlier intervention and stronger in-school support" (The Manitoba Teachers' Society, 2026). These findings raise questions about the mix of safety, prevention and support measures available in schools, including the potential roles of Student Resource Officers (SROs), counsellors, mental-health professionals and community-based supports.

2.4 Domains of Risk and Protection

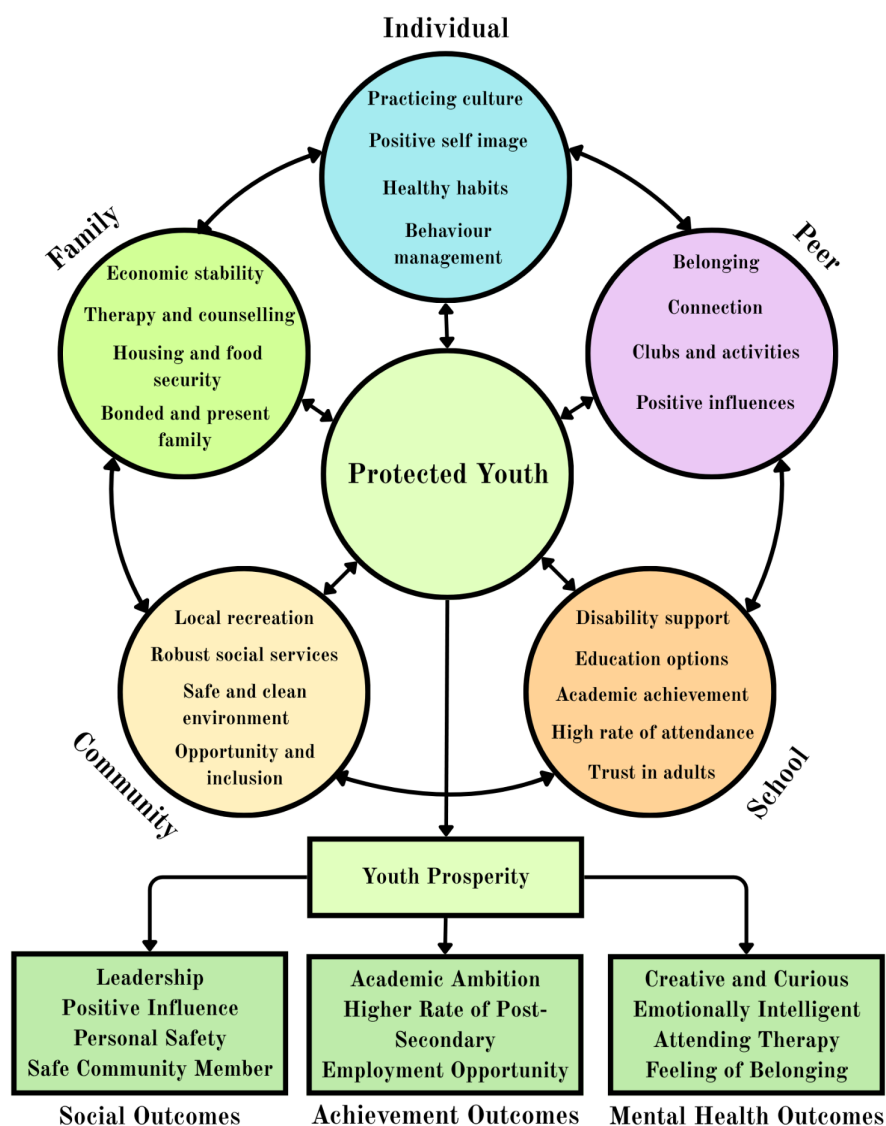
Canada's youth risk framework identifies five risk domains: individual, family, peer, school and community/neighbourhood (Public Safety Canada, 2012). A risk factor is a characteristic or circumstance that increases the likelihood of perpetrating or becoming a victim of youth delinquency and/or violence (Public Safety Canada, 2012; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Overlapping domains of risk factors result in cumulative deprivation, which is when individuals within a society all fall along the bottom in terms of access to the "well-being dimensions" (healthcare, food, etc.) of life at the same time. (Decancq, 2022) Youth with higher rates and severity of cumulative deprivation become at significantly higher risk. Domains of protection operate under the same categorization as domains of risk, with the goal of promoting environments that allow youth to overcome negative circumstances that lead to delinquency, poverty and cycles of trauma. The duties of the federal, provincial and municipal governments are to weigh the impacts of risk through data tracking and investigative reporting. A follow-up must include a response of protective factors that are culturally appropriate and delivered to the equal demand of risk.

Figure 1.1 - Risk Factors



The five domains interact and accumulate which can lead to cumulative deprivation.

Figure 1.2 - Protective Factors



Empowering any domain of protection can contribute to youth prosperity.

2.5 The Modern Risk Domain

In addition to the five domains of risk determined by Public Safety Canada in 2012, this report considers an additional domain of risk equally relevant to the 2026 framework of youth well-being - digital spaces. Two risk factors are identified under the 'digital spaces' risk domain.

Social Media

Social media usage is a widespread concern for the well-being of young people, with over 90% of Canadians under 34 using social media daily (Statistics Canada, 2024). On May 1, 2025 the Canadian Mennonite University alongside Massey College hosted a conference on “Social Media Disinformation”, similar to this year’s conference on Youth at Risk (Chobotov, 2025). This report highlights the many concerns surrounding social media, citing influence operations (IOs) as being a threat to factual information, free speech, Canadian democracy, and mental health across all age brackets (Chobotov, 2025).

A 2025 study by Mental Health Research Canada found that 23% youth aged 16-24 used social media over 7 hours per day. Those in the ‘chronically online’ (7+ hours daily) category reported “poorer mental health indicators, as shown in higher clinical ratings of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress, as well as reports of suicidal ideation” (Mental Health Research Canada, 2025). Nearly 47% of Canadians aged 15 to 19 report losing sleep and/or reduced sleep quality due to social media addiction (Statistics Canada, 2024).

Online political manipulation at the hands of fake news outlets and IOs have added to the noise for youth accessing information on the internet. A scan of 151 studies analyzing youth’s ability to process false information determined that youth are significantly more likely to both overestimate their ability to identify factual information, and underestimate their ability to sniff out false information (Kops et al., 2025). The danger in this reality shows in the form of electoral voting disparity among Gen Z voters with the complex social media algorithms to blame. “41 per cent of men under 30 backed the [Canadian] Conservatives, compared to 23 per cent of women in the same age bracket” (Robinson, 2026), which is a far higher disparity than any other age or

gender metric. This is not a topic of ‘right and wrong’ politics, but rather a probe into algorithm driven online feeds which aim to determine the information of the individual, then sell ideas, products, and behaviours (Robinson, 2026). The risk boils down to real world effects, where projection of the ‘online world’ bleeds into violent behaviours, detrimental habits and extreme ideologies.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI, among other issues related to ethical and environmental concerns, is negatively correlated with child development (Turner, 2026). In a Brookings Institution report on AI learning, they warn that the academic and developmental benefits are outweighed by the consequences of cognitive offloading (2026), which is the “delegation of cognitive tasks to external resources in order to reduce mental demand.” 64% of teens aged 13-17 report using AI in their regular day, with 54% claiming they use it to help with school work (Germain, 2026). Other concerns surrounding violent messaging are becoming prominent as humans try to catch up to the spread of AI chatbots and content. Much of AI content is designed only to get as many clicks as possible, so concerns surrounding content containing extremist politics, gore, racism and misogynistic messaging in the algorithms of youth are increasing rapidly (Lahiri, 2026; Pendyala, 2025). The proposed risk of cognitive offloading and consuming hateful AI content reflects in the disregard for literacy as a core skill which can lead to less academic output and motivation, while encouraging violent behaviours, hate speech parroting and bullying (Pendyala, 2025).

3. A Case Study of Youth at Risk: Tim Barron

Behind the statistics like those cited above, there are human beings who hold the lived experience and stories that come with that. The case of Tim Barron is such a story. Tim Barron is an Indigenous man who grew up in and around the North End and Polo Park areas. Tim's biography dives into his experience as a "second and third intergenerational trauma survivor, addiction survivor, incarceration survivor and former gang member." (Four Sacred Hearts, n.d.). He "moved around a lot growing up... which hurt because [he] wanted to make friends at school, but would move... when [he] was just starting to get to know the other children." (Martin, 2023). Tim's experience is his own, but represents the life of risk that many Manitoban youth are susceptible to. His risk factors followed those in the family domain, with his mother and father drinking and partying to suppress generational trauma, while his uncles and cousins, of whom he idolized, introduced him to gangs (Martin, 2023). The domains of peer and community also played a large part in his early life, with the gangs offering him a sense of collectivism and the North End environment being 52% above the average Winnipeg neighborhood in crime rate, leading to more avenues of criminal activity and higher rates of policing (Bernhardt, 2025). He highlights that he was a 10th grade dropout, representing a deficiency in education early on (Martin, 2023). Most notably, Tim recounts the individual need for belonging and identity which he didn't have access to growing up. From Tim Barrons' perspective, it is "... all from [his] generational trauma" (Martin, 2023). This young boy was paralyzed by all angles of cumulative deprivation before his 16th birthday.

At the age of 35, Tim recounted a life in and out of incarceration since the age of 15. A combination of individual will and protective factors at his disposal helped him escape a life of crime;

- **Sobriety:** Learning that he was repeating the cycle of generational trauma and attending publicly funded self-help groups gave him the strength to stay off substance and begin exploring the ways he can educate himself and help others (Martin, 2023).
- **GED and college:** Having access to adult education and public post-secondary school allowed Tim to complete both his high school program and attain a diploma in Addictions and Mental Health (Four Sacred Hearts, n.d.).
- **Re-integrating with and learning his culture:** Having the ability to peacefully participate in community cultural events and ceremonies allowed him to restructure his sense of belonging (Four Sacred Hearts, n.d.). He was eventually able to meet his father's family in Sagkeeng with whom he has stayed involved with (Martin, 2025).
- **Moving on to become a teacher, leader and protector for others like him:** A connection to family, culture, public schooling and a community that never gave up on him has allowed for Tim to become a counsellor and action therapist (Four Sacred Hearts, n.d.). Additionally, he is “a sweat lodge conductor, Sundancer, Ogichidaa Dancer, Traditional Ceremonial Singer, Pipe Carrier, and a man with a big heart” (Four Sacred Hearts, n.d.).

This turnaround is an example of what can happen when protective factors outweigh and mitigate the effects of cumulative deprivation. The most critical points of Tim's turnaround were community connection, accessible education resources, safe environments away from drugs and gangs, and a sense of **belonging**.

3.1 Initiatives That Help Youth Like Tim Barron

- ***The Link*: Public-Subsidized Multi-Support Resource - Provincial/Municipal**

The Link provides a wide range of resources for disadvantaged families, including a 24/7 crisis hotline, mental health support, cultural integration services, job training, school aid, and public safety initiatives. *The Link* has partnered with WPS for campaigns like *Ghost Gang Life* and *Gang Life is No Life*, which aim to help teens aged 13-16 stay away from and disengage with gang life without facing scrutiny or prosecution (The Link, 2025; City of Winnipeg, 2026).

- ***Oshki-Giizhig* (New Beginnings): Public Funded Indigenous Non-Profit - Provincial**

Oshki-Giizhig provides mental health and development support for people who have suffered from trauma, violence, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and other disabilities (Oshki-Giizhig Inc., 2026).

- **2026 Drug Enforcement Task Force: Policy Action: Provincial/Federal**

A 2026, co-operative government task force operation to stop illegal drug crime at the source. The announcement of the task force included a modernized, humanitarian approach to tackling drug crime, with higher penalties for distributors who provide drugs that result in overdoses, and a non-criminal, aid focused approach for addicts.

- **Indigenous Justice Program (IJP): Policy Action- Federal**

Since 1991, IJP has aimed to bring Indigenous people and Indigenous identity to the justice system. The goals of IJP are to prevent victimization, crime and incarceration through better reflection of Indigenous values in the justice system and providing Indigenous people greater responsibility in judicial processes (Department of Justice Canada, 2025).

- ***Four Sacred Hearts / Circle of Life: Cultural Connection - Grassroots***

Four Sacred Hearts (Circle of Life) is an organization run by Tim Barron, along with 3 other youth at risk survivors, Jeremy Raven, Terrence Morin and Glen Hondz. These men are able to connect with Indigenous youth at risk in a way like no other, having experienced much of the same generational trauma, gang lifestyle, drug addiction and incarceration issues that Indigenous youth face today. Their focus is to combine their skillsets, which range from mentorships, to education, to spiritual healing (Four Sacred Hearts, n.d.).

4. Policy Responses

4.1 What is Manitoba's action plan for youth at risk?

- In 2024-2025 Manitoba pledged 8 million in funding to Meals2Go as a part of the action plan for a national school food program (Government of Canada, n.d.). Meals2Go is a weekend breakfast program that serves students in Winnipeg, northern Manitoba and Brandon (Harvest Manitoba, n.d.). In the 2025-2026 year, they supported 7,000 students every week across 18 schools (Harvest Manitoba, n.d.). Which is a step in the right direction as access to school lunches has been shown to boost attendance, concentration and learning (World Food Programme, n.d.). However, this program is relatively small in scale given that in Canada, more than 1 in 20 students have reported never having lunch, this being a more common trend among older youth (Boutet, 2021).
- In a part of Manitoba's five-year poverty reduction plan, they plan to change the EIA (employment and income assistance) to ensure that adults under 30 who do not have a high school diploma are able to obtain an education regardless of whether it is the fastest

route to employment (Government of Manitoba, 2026). Youth out of high school should have the ability to obtain a later education. Taking action that enables them to do so also enables them to be less at risk.

- On February 25, 2026, Matt Wiebe and Mayor Scott Gillingham would announce alongside others from law enforcement and government- a new task force operation to stop illegal drug crime at the source. The announcement highlighted the targeting of cheap to manufacture, highly addictive illicit drug trade while drawing emphasis on a hard line separation between supply disruption and social support. This means legislation to prosecute distributors reaches far deeper, with pressure to charge drug deals that result in overdoses as murder, while providing addicts access to beds, housing, and harm-reduction services in contrast to possession charges they may have faced under past policies aimed at drug busting (Manitoba Government, 2026).

4.2 What is Winnipeg's action plan for youth at risk?

- Universal school lunch programs are actions initiated all over the world to respond to youth risk. In Winnipeg, the Schroeder Foundation has led efforts to provide lunches in Winnipeg's North End (The Schroeder Foundation, 2025) and school lunch programs have been launched across individual divisions in Winnipeg, such as the Louis Riel School Division in September of 2024 (Winnipeg School Division, n.d.). These schools are benefiting from the National School Food program which partners with the Province of Manitoba, where in turn provides grants to school divisions (Department of Finance Canada, 2024).

While these programs are positive, it should be noted that “[schools] are not required to provide lunch programs for students” (Glenwood School, n.d.). Glenwood

School is one such school that charges families \$90 per student, per year to access a regular school lunch, or \$1 every day a child needs a drop in lunch, which is also a school that falls under the Louis Riel School Division (Glenwood School, n.d.). These programs should be guaranteed to our youth, not only to promote attendance and performance but also to improve youth health and nutrition, especially in struggling households (World Food Programme, n.d.).

- Manitoba is rolling out a pilot project that will give complimentary bus passes for youth in Winnipeg aged 11-21 (Scott, 2026). Guaranteeing students have the physical ability to get to school is one way to tackle absenteeism, however, student polling shows transportation as a low-barrier issue surrounding their abilities to attend school.

5. Public Safety

Winnipeg continues to report comparatively high levels of violent crime among major Canadian cities, despite declines in violent crime in 2024 and 2025 (City of Winnipeg, 2025). In 2024, for the first time in a decade, the City of Winnipeg reported its first major drop on the violent crime index, which is measured using volume, severity and court sentences associated with violent crime (Winnipeg Police Service, 2024). In 2025, both police chief Gene Bowers and Mayor Scott Gillingham had comments surrounding the drop in crime. They praised the efforts of Winnipeg Police and carried optimism about public safety, however, Mayor Gillingham stated that “there’s still too much crime in Winnipeg, and there’s more work to do,” while Chief Bowers commented that this was “by no means a victory...” (Kitching, 2025). Though violent crime volume and severity has reduced at a notable rate, hate-related crime in Winnipeg spiked by 154% in 2025 from 2024 (Orozco, 2026).

Downtown neighbourhoods have always been a focus for policy makers and Winnipeg Police Service. In 2025, the number of criminal offences soared to 7619, reflecting a 17.2% increase from 2024 (Winnipeg Police Service, 2026). The city reported on August 28th, 2026 that people occupying encampments dropped from 700 individuals to 245 from September of last year. Many of these encampments are located downtown and in the areas immediately surrounding. Winnipeg reports that 260 people living in encampments have been housed in the last year. Mayor Scott Gillingham is holding firm that things are moving in the right direction, with others criticizing the validity of the claims of reported numbers and the approach to solving the issue. Concerns include a convenient exclusion of rough sleeping conditions outside of encampments, and the fact that rehousing does not provide addictions help for people who are/were living in encampments (MacLean, 2026). Of the 17.2% increase in Downtown crime, violence does not contribute, but rather has declined by 1.7% compared to 2024. Property related crime has increased by 27.2% and drug related crime has increased by 27.1% (Winnipeg Police Service, 2026). These statistics paint a picture of the actual crime being committed downtown, which shows desperation among addicts and impoverished individuals. The lens must be shifted to focus on treating addictions, improving the living state of impoverished individuals, and targeting organized crime groups, who are responsible for much of the financial corruption and drug trafficking in Canada (CISC, 2026).

5.1 Organized Crime Groups

Organized crime groups (OCGs) are a significant public-safety concern because their activities can connect drug trafficking, violence, firearms and financial crime. Criminal Intelligence Service Canada reported in 2025 that 58% of assessed OCGs were associated with businesses through ownership, employment or exploitation, and that more than half were

implicated in the illicit firearms market (CISC, 2026). These connections can provide opportunities to move illegal goods, conceal criminal proceeds and integrate illicit profits into the legitimate economy.

In May 2026, Winnipeg Police reported the results of Project Puma, a two-year investigation that resulted in 33 arrests and the seizure of more than \$37.2 million in illicit drugs, including cocaine, methamphetamine and fentanyl. Police reported alleged connections between members of the network under investigation and organized-crime groups including the Hells Angels, Wolfpack Alliance and Mexican cartels. The investigation involved multiple agencies, including FINTRAC, illustrating the importance of financial intelligence alongside conventional drug and organized-crime enforcement (Winnipeg Police Service, 2026).

5.1.1 Money Laundering and the Financial Infrastructure of Organized Crime

Public discussion of money laundering in Canada has focused heavily on British Columbia and, to a lesser extent, Toronto. However, money laundering is also relevant to understanding organized crime and the illegal drug economy in Winnipeg. Street-level trafficking represents only one part of the business of organized crime. The proceeds generated through drug trafficking and other criminal activity must also be concealed, transferred, invested or converted into apparently legitimate assets.

A 2022 Massey College research paper by Mary-Jane Bennett, *Money Laundering: A Domestic and Global Crisis*, describes three commonly recognized stages of money laundering: placement, in which proceeds of crime enter the financial system; layering, in which transactions are used to obscure their source; and integration, in which funds are given an apparently legitimate origin through assets such as real estate, securities or luxury goods. Bennett also

examines the use of shell companies, nominee directors and other structures that can conceal the beneficial owner of assets (Bennett, 2022).

The connection between money laundering, organized crime and drug trafficking is particularly relevant to Winnipeg. Bennett cites a 2020 Criminal Intelligence Service Canada assessment finding that, among organized-crime groups involved in money laundering, 65% were involved in the cocaine trade and 25% in methamphetamine trafficking. The Government of Canada has similarly identified money laundering as a means through which criminals can profit from underlying offences including drug trafficking, human trafficking and violent crime (Bennett, 2022).

Recent Winnipeg investigations illustrate this financial dimension of organized crime. In 2024, the Winnipeg Police Service announced the results of Project Soft Landing, a large-scale investigation targeting a high-level interprovincial drug network. Police alleged that millions of dollars worth of illicit drugs and potentially firearms were being trafficked into Winnipeg from the Greater Toronto Area. Search warrants executed in Manitoba, Ontario and British Columbia resulted in seizures including \$1.7 million in Canadian currency, approximately 30 kilograms of cocaine, firearms, luxury vehicles and approximately \$4 million in alleged proceeds of crime. Fourteen people were formally charged with offences related to organized crime, drug trafficking, firearms, proceeds of crime and laundering proceeds of crime (Winnipeg Police Service, 2024).

FINTRAC subsequently highlighted Project Soft Landing in its 2024-25 Annual Report as an example of financial intelligence assisting a Winnipeg Police investigation. FINTRAC reported that its intelligence contributed to the investigation and noted the seizures of \$1.7

million in currency, approximately 30 kilograms of cocaine and approximately \$4 million in proceeds of crime (FINTRAC, 2025).

Project Puma further demonstrates the scale and interprovincial and international reach of Winnipeg's illegal drug market. The investigation's use of FINTRAC and other partner agencies reinforces the point that organized crime is not only a street-level public-safety problem but also a financial enterprise. The Winnipeg evidence does not establish that the city experiences the same scale or forms of money laundering documented in British Columbia. It does show that organized crime operating in Winnipeg is connected to larger drug and financial networks. For public-safety policy, the implication is that suppressing organized crime involves more than arresting street-level drug dealers or gang members. It also involves identifying and disrupting the financial infrastructure that allows organized crime to retain and reinvest its profits. For Winnipeg, this raises questions about the use of FINTRAC intelligence, proceeds-of-crime investigations, beneficial-ownership information, asset forfeiture and cooperation among municipal police, provincial authorities and federal agencies. These financial measures complement prevention and intervention efforts directed toward young people who may otherwise be recruited into the visible, street-level activities of organized crime.

5.2 Youth Crime and Gangs

Public Safety Canada began funding various government and grassroots programs to address gang affiliated Winnipeg youth in 2007, with the goal of establishing a framework for a "Winnipeg Youth Gang Prevention Fund," which still operates in 2026 (Public Safety Canada, 2012). The Winnipeg Youth Gang fund was enacted to assess the risks associated with youth violence and their affiliation with gangs, mitigate risks of gun violence, provide alternatives to promote healthy and safe social behaviour, and to prevent victimization (Public Safety Canada,

2012, p. 1). In 2012, groups that received funding reported little to no change in the amount of gang affiliated youth (Public Safety Canada, 2012, p. 5). With that being said, it is possible that the aims of the project were targeting the problems from a flawed angle. One thing this program made apparent was that the amount and quality of support youth received from family was positively correlated with the effectiveness of reducing gang affiliation (Public Safety Canada, 2012, p. 5).

Preventing gang affiliation in youth comes down to properly assessing the domains of risk that affect them most, most notably; the neighbourhoods they reside in; the economic and psychological conditions of youth and their immediate circles of family and friends; and school attendance. Gang behaviour and participation in youth is typically linked to signs of cumulative deprivation. In one study, youth experiencing cumulative deprivation were 13 times more likely to join gangs (NGC, n.d.).

In 2025, reported youth crime across Winnipeg declined by 11.7%, while reported youth violent crime declined by 16% from 2024 (Scott, 2026). These changes are relevant to public safety, but crime statistics alone do not establish trends in youth gang affiliation. Other risk factors discussed in this paper, including chronic absenteeism, poverty, housing instability and drug use, remain important areas for prevention and intervention.

5.3 Youth Drug Use

Youth drug use is an issue that policy makers have procedurally tried to address in the same ways to no avail. Policies addressing this issue are often centered on restricting access as opposed to addressing the causes that lead youth to substance use. For instance, Bill 54, *The Smoking And Vapour Products Control Amendment Act*, which plans to ban the sale of flavoured vape products at convenience stores and other non-smoke shop businesses and is currently in

session at the time of writing this paper (The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, 2026). These policies fail to address the issue as most youth are not at risk for addiction and use substances as a way to take control and express autonomy (The Government of Manitoba, n.d.), while also neglecting to address the avenues in which youth are actually obtaining nicotine products which is typically online (Clement, 2026). This idea is further supported by Canadian and Manitoban youth alike, who expressed the reasons that they engage in drug or alcohol use which include: tumultuous relationships with their families, experiencing bullying and mal-understandings of the consequences associated with substance use (Porath-Waller et al., 2013; Turner et al., 2018). This points to problems within families, peer-to-peer relationships and education.

While youth may not be dramatically falling to addiction, this does not mean that there is not a problem with youth substance use. From 2016 to 2026, calls regarding youth alcohol or substance use doubled, with many of those calls having to do with alcohol poisoning or a drug overdose (Hempel, 2026). According to the Winnipeg Police Service's 2025 Report (2026), youth drug related crime in Manitoba is 6.3% lower than it was in 2024. This highlights a problem with the usage and education surrounding it as the primary problem youth are facing in terms of substance use. Restrictive policies seem alluring on the basis that less accessibility should mean less use, however this is often not the case. Especially for youth, restrictive policies surrounding illicit and age-gated substances shows very little evidence of changing use patterns (Greenwood, 2021).

In order to combat youth drug use, the aim should be at preventative measures and not restrictive ones. One preventative measure is being set in motion to roll out in 2028; Manitoba intends on implementing a new curriculum across grades K-12 surrounding "substances and patterns of behaviour" (Macintosh, 2026). This may prove fruitful in Manitoba's goal to limit

youth substance use through broadening the scope and length that youth receive education on drug and alcohol use. While this appears to be a step in the right direction, it only addresses the education concerns that surround youth substance use and not the interpersonal relationships that also notably contribute to the likelihood that youth will engage with substance use (Porath-Waller et al., 2013; Turner et al., 2018). Education may help with the problem, but without addressing the other half— youth will continue to find unhealthy avenues to express their inner turmoil. A good comparison that illustrates this point is the transition from cigarettes to vaping. As education improved and accessibility was restricted, youth stopped using cigarettes nearly as frequently (Warner, 2024), but the other related problems were left unaddressed and left these youth searching for a new, “healthier” alternative; vaping. For the 2023 to 2024 year, 18.4% of Manitoban youth from grades 7-12 were using vapes (Free Press, 2026). This displays that while education is effective, it is not wholly effective in addressing the root problems that lead to youth usage. It is therefore pertinent that these problems are handled in a multifaceted approach that involves education alongside support services that could help address youth concerns with their family and peers.

5.4 Student Resource Officers (SROs)

Student resource officers, or ‘school resource officers’ (SROs) in Manitoba are Winnipeg Police constables stationed in primary, middle and secondary schools who are intended to uplift the school community and help prevent crises (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Students' relationships with their SRO can allow for intervention to take place in schools when it is seriously needed. For example, on June 10th, 2025 in Brandon, a 16 year old student entered École Secondaire Neelin armed with a sword, attacking a fellow student and chasing staff. A student phoned the school’s School Resources Officer directly, and the school was locked down

promptly- as officers arrived in minutes to apprehend the suspect (Macintosh, 2025). This SRO built rapport with a student that allowed for a more effective response to an emergency situation. Brandon School Division would reveal in a public announcement that the attack was racially motivated, and that the response time of Brandon Police Services helped prevent a more severe outcome (Brandon School Division, 2025). Police described the attack as a “targeted act of hate,” supporting federal prosecutors’ charges of terrorism towards the accused (Anderson, 2026).

Premier Wab Kinew said about the incident:

“I’ve seen that SROs are positive for my kids’ schools and schools in my community and when you see a heroic action like we saw in Brandon this week, then it really speaks to another dimension.”

He went on to urge the WSD board to consider reinstating SROs, but did not issue a directive (Macintosh, 2025).

Up until 2021, Winnipeg School Division employed nine SROs across 78 schools. The division ended its funding for the program as part of its 2021 budget reductions; contemporary reporting stated that the decision was made solely for financial reasons while an evaluation of the program was still underway (CBC News, 2021). SROs can provide a law-enforcement and emergency-safety presence in cases involving violence or threats. For youth experiencing substance-use problems, mental-health crises or family difficulties, the evidence reviewed in this paper also points to the importance of counselors, mental-health and addiction professionals, family supports and community-based programs. The appropriate balance among these approaches is a matter for policy discussion.

6. A Case Study on Grassroots Public Safety: Sel Burrows & Point Powerline

Point Powerline is a citizen watch and tip line operation, founded by Sel Burrows and his fellow community members in 2007 to help make Point Douglas a safer community. The organization acts as an alternative community safety measure that combines community watch and an anonymous tip line to report criminal activity, drug houses and local safety hazards among other matters of public safety and community wellness.

“The Man in the Yellow House”

Sel Burrows is a local activist and chair of the Railyard Relocation Committee who spent 20 years living in North Point Douglas, one of the highest crime rate neighbourhoods in Canada. His intentions with establishing Point Powerline was to provide a community-run reporting service that could gather information about specific cases of criminal activity, then use the power of the community to drive away criminal wrongdoers (Burrows, personal communication, 2026). Many members in the community would turn to Burrows, who was recognized by his “big yellow house” of which he shared with his late wife until 2021 (Hildebrandt, 2021).

In two separate cases, Burrows was the first to act on vulnerable members of the community in crisis. One saw the yellow house as the trustworthy place for a youth, who had been attacked by a machete, to seek immediate assistance. Burrows got in contact with the police who acted quickly, which was necessary since the attacker was just up the street (Kavanagh, 2018.) In the other, Burrows and a woman in the community responded to an out of control party where a young woman was standing in the river in her underwear after being sexually assaulted. They were able to talk to her which may have prevented further crisis, then contacted police who responded to the situation. Burrows was pleased that the police looked after the young woman,

but was concerned about police inaction in addressing the rowdy party. In response to the situation, Point Powerline posted flyers describing the situation, and urged members of the community to contact them should they see another party by the river. Burrows, in an interview with the Winnipeg Free Press, said “there’s never been another party there,” with the community’s response and education of the consequences largely to thank (Hildebrandt, 2021).

Methodology, Successes, Expansion

Point Powerline’s choice to avoid using the police directly is a combination of preventing use of excessive force, avoiding wasted time and resources, and the very fact that they were simply not needed for many cases (Thompson, 2019.) Additionally, many anonymous tips are in regard to local hazards, drug users, mental health emergencies and minor disputes, all issues of public safety that may warrant action from services outside of the police force. The option to be able to call an anonymous tip line is also a matter of trust. Many residents live by a “no ratting, no squealing” due to a negative perception of police and concerns that non-emergency reports will get buried in files (Braidotti, 2019). Though many calls are handled by members of the community, Point Powerline remains in a good working relationship with police, utilizing their services in aforementioned cases of emergency, while participating in reporting and informing (Burrows, personal communication, 2026).

Often, in cases of meth operations being phoned in, the powerline leverages landlords, who are “eager to evict drug dealers” when presented with evidence (Thompson, 2019.) In other cases, Burrows and members of the community were able to drive away drug dealers and gangs simply by having eyes on them or threatening police involvement.

In 2023, the Government of Manitoba shared a news release, detailing 6 cases of Criminal Property Forfeiture in Point Douglas. This occurred as a result of grassroots programs

such as Point Powerline and Project Matriarch, though police would not share which organization(s) specifically was/were involved. Along with the announcement, the Government of Manitoba shared that the properties would be donated to “non-profit and Indigenous organizations to build affordable housing units for low-income families” (Government of Manitoba, 2023). Burrows commented on the matter, sharing that the seizures send “a strong message to criminals” and that the donations of the homes were “significant payback” to the community who has been suffering from high criminal activity and dealing with consequences related to the drug crisis (The Canadian Press, 2023). Outcomes such as this show that grassroots operations are not only participating in crime prevention, but that they are also able to help put resources back into the community with their actions.

In 2025, the Powerline model would extend to another high crime rate neighbourhood, just northwest of Point Douglas in the William Whyte area. The line is led by Darrell Warren, who pushed for grants to get the program started earlier in the year, with the project coming to fruition in October and being named the William Whyte Neighbourhood Association. The line operates similarly to Point Powerline, with stated intention to collect reports on the hazards associated with the 200 vacant properties in the area in addition to crime. (Honeybun, 2025).

As of September 2026, both powerlines are fully operational and report high rates of success in their goals of crime prevention and community safety.

“The Old Man at the Heart of the Community”

Sel Burrows also remains frequently active in discussions and policy action surrounding chronic absenteeism in schools and addressing poverty in North End and Downtown communities. He states: “Chronic absenteeism is not a school thing, but rather an issue of poverty and the consequences that come with living in impoverished neighbourhoods.” As part

of the Railyard Relocation Committee, he observed that “either side of the railyards are the worst slums” in Winnipeg (personal communication, 2026). The relocation, in addition to strengthening Winnipeg’s economic conditions, would provide 465 hectares of land to be used for housing developments, green space, transportation and small businesses. Premier Wab Kinew spoke to the matter in August of 2026, announcing that Lloyd Axworthy would conduct a 90-day feasibility study to assess the possibility of this massive 20 year project. The Premier is calling it “an investment in the province’s future.” (Lukes, 2026).

Considering our understanding of cumulative deprivation, the issues of poverty and public access to recreation remain central to the research, understanding, and prescription for action in addressing mental health, chronic absenteeism and public safety. Many of the answers to these issues lie within the voices of the community, grassroots programs and local activists who truly care about improving youth conditions and the quality of the neighbourhoods they inhabit.

7. Mental Health as a ‘Silent Crisis’ Across Canada

In Canada, mental health concerns across all age brackets is recognized as a major concern and has been stated to be the biggest threat to public health for Canadians (Dozois, 2019, p.21). Mental health has been identified as a “silent crisis” due to the economic and emotional cost it puts on Canadians without adequate preventative measures or support put into place (Peachy et al., 2013). In Canada, a report by CSA Group (2026) found that the economic cost associated with poor mental health is \$180 billion every year. In the same report, the estimated economic toll of failing to meet the mental health needs of Canadians will reach 500 billion by 2050 (CSA Group, 2026). Failing to address this issue pragmatically and effectively is not an

option. Instead of being a positive example for other provinces, Manitoba, as a province, is a contributor to the problem.

7.1 Mental Health in Manitoba

Poor mental health is a crisis in Manitoba and it has been repeatedly under-addressed. As of 2023, Manitoba has 21.7 psychologists per 100,000 people which is the lowest across the provinces (CPA, 2025, p.3). Only about ~8 per 100,000 psychologists represent public workers, while the rest operate under private practice (CPA, 2025, p.4). Increasing access to psychological care is necessary for addressing the overall mental health crisis. The lack of psychologists available is reflected in the wait times that Manitobans seeking care may experience. One woman, Raven Deering, was put on an 8 month waitlist for psychotherapy, even with an urgent referral from her doctor (Donnelly, 2022). Timely treatment is tremendously important for addressing mental health concerns. Delaying care can worsen mental health symptoms, which can then worsen outcomes and quality of life of those afflicted (Ahad, A. et al., 2023). Critically, Manitoba must also increase access to publicly funded therapists. As it stands, the average cost of therapy for Manitobans is \$150-\$175 an hour and on the lowest end it is still about \$90 per hour of therapy (My Winnipeg Therapist, n.d.). This is not affordable for Manitobans as a whole, who, as of 2024, make an average of \$30.10 per hour (Statistics Canada, 2024.) Addressing this crisis is not only necessary for Manitobans, but also for Manitoban youth, who are often the ones falling victim to mental health concerns and the effects of mentally undertreated adults in their vicinity.

7.2 Youth Mental Health Crisis

Youth mental health is a concern across the country, but it is an issue that is particularly present within Manitoba. Manitoba is unique in its leading cause of death for youth aged 10-17; suicide (Manitoba Profile, 2024). For Indigenous youth in the same age profile, the rate of suicide is 4.6 times higher than the rest of the province (Manitoba Profile, 2024). These deaths are preventable, yet they represent the largest loss of life for the youth of Manitoba. Youth who are experiencing a mental health crisis should not have to endure limitations and wait times to get access to potentially life saving care.

School counselors are one avenue students should have ready access to for their mental health concerns. Instead, during transitional points where students tend to struggle the most, their services are allocated to administrative scheduling for hundreds of students at a time (Porter, 2024). Students who each have individual needs that those schedules must accommodate which then interferes with the school counselors ability to help students who are in need of support outside of their school schedule (Porter, 2024). These responsibilities not only affect students' access to resources but it also creates feelings of burnout among school guidance counselors (Porter, 2024). Students' mental well-being should be the priority of school counselors. How are students meant to feel supported when their support systems are not consistently accessible through the school year?

Outside of the counselors' office, students should also feel secure, welcome and overall positive while at school. According to Klinger et al. (2011), “[young] people who feel connected with their school and have positive experiences with teachers and peers are more likely to develop strong emotional bonds and self-confidence.” (p. 47) and that “[they] are much less likely to engage in health-compromising activities or struggle with their emotional well-being...”

(p. 47). With the current rates of chronic absenteeism amongst Manitoban youth, it is imperative for youth to view school as a safe and secure place to both be heard and learn in.

7.3 Youth Mental Health Global Solution: Netherlands

To find solutions that work for addressing this crisis, we must look at frameworks outside both Manitoba and Canada. In terms of youth mental well-being, the Netherlands ranks number one overall for youth well-being and number one specifically in the mental health domain of youth well-being (UNICEF, 2025). One strategy implemented by the Netherlands in 2018 to reach at-risk youth struggling with mental health was to introduce peer-to-peer youth walk-in centers (Boonstra et al., 2023). Peer-to-peer youth walk-in clinics are clinics that offer free and anonymous peer-to-peer counseling delivered to youth aged 12-25 in a non-clinical environment by trained peers with help from on-site healthcare professionals (Boonstra et al., 2023). These clinics operate without referral requirements, waiting lists, costs for clients or even an intake process making them accessible to even the hardest to reach youth (Boonstra et al., 2023). While effective at reaching seemingly helping youth, due to the structure of the system, it is difficult to track how effective these clinics are in reality (Boonstra et al., 2023). Although we cannot identify the effectiveness of these clinics specifically, from 2018 when the Netherlands opened up their first clinic (Boonstra et al., 2023), to having 15 total locations across the Netherlands as of 2026 (@ease, n.d.), implying that they have been effective in some capacity. A model that mimics this may be effective at reaching and assisting youth at risk within Manitoba.

8. Youth Education

Access to free and effective education is a fundamental human right across Canada. “Education is considered a significant human right both in Canada and under international human rights law, a right not to be unreasonably denied because of one’s gender, ethnic origin, disability or age” (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, n.d.). Along with this classification, Manitoba’s Education and Early Childhood Learning dashboard legislates that Appropriate Education Planning (AEP) is amended to allow all children, including those with special needs “to receive appropriate educational programming that fosters student participation in both the academic and social life of the school” (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, n.d.). With that being stated, among 3rd and 4th grade students’ assessments of literacy, only 36% meet proficiency expectations in numeracy competencies, and only 45.3% in English reading competencies (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2025). The assessment of 3rd and 4th grade students is used primarily as an early intervention and preventative measure rather than a definitive pass/fail outlook.

The Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP,) which was founded in 2003 and releases reports every 4 years, offers academic data in the youth range to better assess the competency of grade 8/Secondary II students (Chapman-Chin et al., 2026). In the current model, science, reading and mathematics are used as the three competencies to assess academic performance. Students’ academic proficiency is measured in each subject based on “raw score” from 0 - 1000. Each new report assesses one subject as a major domain and the other two as minor in order to maintain diverse information results over studies. The 2023 report is used as the most recent and relevant data in Manitoba and Canada, and measures against performance in

the 2019 PCAP assessment for a pre-pandemic and post-pandemic outlook on academic proficiency;

Science Performance Levels (Chapman-Chin et al., 2026, p. 12-13)

- Level 1: Scores below 382.
- Level 2: Scores from 382 to 528.
- Level 3: Scores from 529 to 614.
- Level 4: Scores above 614.

Note: Science was selected as the major domain for PCAP 2023, opening a deeper analysis of the data and an updated structuring of averages.

Average Scores in Science in Manitoba and Canada

Manitoba 2019 (average)	493	Manitoba 2023 (average)	476
Canada 2019 (weighted average)	505	Canada 2023 (weighted average)	501

Data gathered from *PCAP 2023* (p. 15) by Chapman-Chin et al., 2026. Council of Ministers of Education, Canada; *PCAP 2019* (p. 66) by O’Grady et al., 2021. Council of Ministers of Education, Canada

Reading Performance Levels

- Average reading competency: 500.

Note: For consistent comparisons, the average is set to 500. This figure is based on the 2007 PCAP report which used reading as a major domain. (Chapman-Chin et al., 2026, p. 56)

Average Scores in Reading in Manitoba and Canada

Manitoba 2019 (average)	481	Manitoba 2023 (average)	483
Canada 2019 (weighted average)	505	Canada 2023 (weighted average)	505

Data gathered from *PCAP 2023* (p. 57) by Chapman-Chin et al., 2026. Council of Ministers of Education, Canada; *PCAP 2019* (p. 56) by O’Grady et al., 2021. Council of Ministers of Education, Canada

Mathematics Performance Levels

- Average mathematics competency: 500.

Note: For consistent comparisons, the average is set to 500. This figure is based on the 2010 PCAP report which used mathematics as a major domain. (Chapman-Chin et al., 2026, p. 73)

Average Scores in Mathematics in Manitoba and Canada

Manitoba 2019 (average)	475	Manitoba 2023 (average)	483
Canada 2019 (weighted average)	510	Canada 2023 (weighted average)	510

Data gathered from *PCAP 2023* (p. 74) by Chapman-Chin et al., 2026. Council of Ministers of Education, Canada; *PCAP 2019* (p. 32) by O’Grady et al., 2021. Council of Ministers of Education, Canada

The analysis of these figures display four points of interest;

1. Canada’s overall academic resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic was strong and effective at maintaining scores in most areas.
2. Manitoba’s academic resilience was strong, even seeing increases in reading in mathematics domains.
3. Manitoba’s youth are struggling academically with sciences, while Canada’s average also saw a slight decrease.

4. Manitoba remains well below the Canadian average in all measured domains. Science deficiencies are seen as a result of less hands-on learning, less critical thinking usage and lack of lab time during the COVID-19 pandemic (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, n.d.).

The response of Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning has been to pilot a new science curriculum since 2024, with 90 educators participating in the project (Bernacki, 2026). The pilot offered voluntary implementation in 2025-2026, and will have a full scale rollout in the 2026-2027 school year. The new format is also able to factor in Indigenous perspectives and preventative medicine to the curricula (Macintosh, 2024), of which areas had previously been criticized for being outdated or being introduced too late in student learning (Kabatay & Johnson, 2019). Manitoba Education was able to develop an entirely new curriculum aimed at solving deficiencies, pilot the program, and fully launch the program in response to a set of deficiencies displayed in data across the province. To more closely examine deficiencies in all areas of learning and to develop solutions, Manitoba Education must maintain similar levels of responses and feedback. While the response to science curricula has been pragmatic and will be measured on effectiveness over the coming years, the response to low metrics in all academic fields and the presence of chronic (and severe chronic) absenteeism plaguing inner city schools must be assessed and addressed to the same level of urgency.

8.1 Chronic (and Severe Chronic) Absenteeism in Manitoba

Manitoba's policy rights and requirements state two important facts plainly and clearly;

1. In accordance with this Act, a person who is five years of age or older on December 31 in a year has the right to attend school from the beginning of the fall term of that year until:
 - (a) the last school day of June in the year in which the person becomes 21 years of age; or
 - (b) the day the person receives a graduation diploma or certificate of completion, as defined in the regulations (*The Public Schools Act*, 1987, s. 259).
2. A child of compulsory school age shall attend school. (*The Public Schools Act*, 1987, s. 259.1).

Manitoba defines both chronic absenteeism and severe chronic absenteeism in its official documentation (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, n.d.). Severe chronic absenteeism is defined by children and youth whose “unexcused absences account for 20 or more classes in a single high school course or 20 percent or more of instructional days in Kindergarten to Grade 8 in a reporting period” (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2023). The importance of classification is that it comes with a spotlight being placed on the issue and having the issue written into action. Manitoba's 2023 plan includes a section on “proactive and preventative attendance practices,” a need for proper documenting, analyzing and reporting, a fair, non-punitive response, and finally, a coordinated use of services and restorative practices to reintegrate (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2023). The framework for action is present, concise and effective. The problem primarily lies in the action plan's execution

and in sustained high absenteeism results. The following section assesses the past decade of efforts by community members, activists, youth organizations, schools, and government to identify causes, consequences and solutions related to chronic absenteeism.

2017-2022 - Winnipeg One Presentation, Task Force

In 2017, Inner City Youth Alive Founder (then Director) Kent Dueck, teamed up with Sel Burrows and Kyle Mason to present the Winnipeg School Division board with concerns about absenteeism and the disparity in truancy between St. Johns High School (a North End school) and Kelvin High School (a South End school) (Winnipeg Free Press, 2017). The data showed that although reflecting similar numbers of registered students, the students who had missed 4 or more classes per month at SJHS were 161, whereas Kelvin only showed 38 (Winnipeg Free Press, 2017). They proposed ideas towards a cause, including the concept of out of school risk factors, then offered a solution: connect chronically absent youth with other community networks and school programs that have already been established (Winnipeg Free Press, 2017). In a May 2017 response obtained from Sel Burrows, the board expressed their gratitude towards awareness of the matter, but explained that “many measures and initiatives have been undertaken by the Division.”

During the same time period, a 14 person provincial task force was formed with the goal of tackling chronic absenteeism, which included Kent Dueck, Pauline Clarke, Sel Burrows, the deputy ministers of education and justice, and others working in school administration and community campaigns. In May of 2018, Kent stated that “an unfortunate reality is that Winnipeg School Division number one was ironically absent at these meetings about absenteeism, they attended only one out of three” (Keele, 2018). In January of 2020, Kevin Goertzen, former Education Minister, spoke in a Government of Manitoba news release. He addressed the task

force's efforts and spoke to the fact that "absenteeism is connected with poor outcomes such as justice involvement or mental illness and addictions" (Manitoba Education, 2020). The task force would go on to dissolve in 2022 after providing a list of recommendations for future action, which included strict and standardized tracking guidelines along with schooling alternatives for students who have struggled with re-integration. They also suggested a permanent government department for tackling chronic absenteeism. Ultimately, the feedback from the group showed that obtaining information on absenteeism was extremely difficult, as were the efforts to establish absenteeism as a crisis (Macintosh, 2022).

2022-2025 - Engage Education, Superintendent Address, Initiatives, *Absent*

In 2022, after a 2021 pilot project aimed at information acquisition and practice strategies, Inner City Youth Alive launched 'Engage Education' (Inner City Youth Alive, n.d.). The goals of Engage Education were to assist youth with access to tutors, provide community outreach workers, and ultimately combat chronic absenteeism in North End communities (Mallory Pledger, n.d.).

In January of 2023, Wayne Awasko, Early Childhood Learning Minister announced a \$500,000 provincially funded awareness campaign named "School. Keep Going." (Liewicki, 2023). The initiative came backed by the aforementioned 2023 action plan titled "Safe and caring schools: a policy directive and action plan to enhance student presence and engagement." The key takeaways from the initiative and plan come in the form of quotes. Former Deputy Minister of Education, Dana Rudy states that "One absence is enough of an issue to solicit a response" (Liewicki, 2023), while Wayne Ewasko is paraphrased noting students who go to school regularly experience more community belonging and confidence, and they're more likely to graduate (Liewicki, 2023). Minister Ewasko's quote highlights the understanding that students

must attend school to succeed and that belonging was a key in addressing absenteeism, while Former Minister Rudy's quote carries significant weight and responsibility, especially in the wake of chronic absenteeism numbers breaking public media in the near future.

In January of 2024, Winnipeg School Division superintendent, Matt Henderson announced plans to address chronic absenteeism after it was revealed that 3100 students were unaccounted for in the Winnipeg School Division (Greenslade, 2024). He refuted the claims of numbers being that high, claiming his team only found 800 chronically absent students, with 75% of them accounted for (Greenslade, 2024). "That's significant. That's worrying, I don't want to downplay that and just say, 'It's just that number.' I think anytime a child is not coming to school, that's an emergency" (Greenslade, 2024).

In October of 2025, Inner City Youth Alive would release the local documentary, *Absent*, which featured figures on chronic absenteeism as high as 70% in some schools, the concept of a flexible school tax reallocation system and the successful outcomes of the Engage Education program. It featured Kent Dueck, Mallory Pledger, Sel Burrows, Kyle Mason, Reg Klassen, community outreach workers, two youth students and a mother, all offering their insight and experience with North End schools, the Winnipeg One School Division, reintegration, and community activism. One of the goals of the documentary's release was to increase awareness on the subject of chronic absenteeism by dissecting the number of students absent and comparing figures between North End schools and South End schools, similarly to the presentation in 2017. Another highlight, of the more controversial sort and presented by Kent himself, suggests that if schools refuse to partake in student reintegration services that they should be forfeiting up to 71% of their funding to organizations who will, which is in line with the reported absentee rates in the film. Kyle Mason, an Indigenous counsellor, shares his perspective on Indigenous youth

absentee rates, indicating that generational trauma at the hands of residential schools and cultural erasure plays a large role. One of the students, Avery, believed that “... a lot of the time it’s just family life...” in regards to the barriers for getting youth to come to school (ICYA, 2025). She also said that the youth missing school represent “...relationships that are absolutely failing, that are just completely gone.”(ICYA, 2025). Mallory Pledger, Director of Programming at ICYA, showed the success rates that Engage Education has achieved (50% of more days at school) in re-engaging chronically absent students. In the first year, they achieved a 40% success rate, which Pledger describes as “high in the social services world when dealing with high barriered individuals.” (ICYA, 2025). She goes on to show a 62% success rate in year 2, followed by a 72% success in year 3, citing a “phased approach” and considering “all of the barriers” (ICYA, 2025). As of 2026, Engage Education is still an active program working with outreach workers and drivers to get kids in schools.

2026-Present - Scale of Chronic Absenteeism, Winnipeg One Summit & Data

In a 2026 CTV interview, independent MLA for Fort Garry, Mark Wasyliv, said he had obtained province-wide absenteeism data for the 2023-2024 school year from a private source. He reported 15,288 chronically absent students in Manitoba (Bernacki, 2026). Due to the underlying provincial dataset not being publicly released with the report, this figure should be understood as a reported estimate rather than an independently verified provincial statistic. The report appeared shortly before the Winnipeg School Division Absenteeism Summit, which brought renewed attention to attendance and reintegration (Macintosh, 2026).

The outcome of the 2026 Chronic Absenteeism summit has led to mixed feedback from members of the community, with responses feeling that the information acquired and ideas for action were much stronger, but that a plan was still not fully developed. The summit included

educators, knowledge keepers, students, community organizations, researchers, and government officials who took to panels and keynotes to dissect the state of chronic absenteeism in the Winnipeg School Division (Winnipeg School Division, 2026). During breakout sessions, accountability was held strongly in the direction of schools' flexibility to educate in ways that serve the needs of the student, and in extracurricular/recreational access to learning and leisure (Winnipeg School Division, 2026). In the conclusion of the summit, the participants collectively determined that a curriculum focused solution was not enough to contribute to meaningful change. Recommendations included but weren't limited to; relational infrastructure in schools, cross-sector coordination, proactive outreach models, and increasing cultural responsiveness in programming and practice (Winnipeg School Division, 2026).

In June of 2026, Winnipeg School Division would release all of the gathered data on students experiencing chronic absenteeism from the 2023-2024, 2024-2025, and 2025-2026 school years in a commitment to transparency. The absenteeism dashboard reveals **three** points of interest that transition to the current conversation surrounding chronic absenteeism;

1. Provincially reported figures of absentees totaling 3100 students as being 'under investigation' were far more accurate than the 800 students claimed by the superintendent in January of 2024. The data from 2023-2024 shows 2908 students were chronically absent (Greenslade, 2024; WSD, 2026). This represents either a lack of awareness surrounding the gravity of the situation, or a lack of transparency, both of which are improving, but require additional action to gain the trust of parents, students and community members that real difference is taking place.

2. The total number of students experiencing chronic absenteeism has reduced in the 2025-2026 report compared to 2023-2024, which is especially noticeable in high school students. The '23-'24 report showed 2908 total absentees with 1310 (or ~45%) being high school students. The '25-'26 report shows 2656 total absentees with only 814 absentees (or ~30.5%) being high school students. A ~37.8% drop among high school students, while the total number of chronically absent students has dropped ~9% (Greenslade, 2024; WSD, 2026). This indicates that systems are starting to work for high schoolers- and that awareness, reintegration efforts and Vocational Education Training (VET) are serving to help a portion of chronically absent secondary students between the ages of 15 and 21. These systems should continue to be funded by the Manitoba Government and in most cases, funded more, and classified as being of the highest importance to the education system.
3. Children from the Winnipeg School Division attending elementary schools are significantly more chronically absent in '24-'25 and '25-'26 than in '23-'24 (WSD, 2026). The earlier number of chronically absent elementary students represent the minority, with 1310 reported (or ~45%) while the recent figure shows 1842 students (or 69.4%), a striking majority (WSD, 2026). The answer to the solution is in the data. Intervention of chronically absent behaviour must occur earlier in students' education, with reintegration services, alternative education and parent/teacher accountability being the strongest drivers for student retention.

With a \$79.8 (3.5%) million increase to the annual Manitoba budget going into 2026-2027, and WSD's budget increasing by 4.5%, WSD should be investing in reintegrating

and retaining presence in students from K-8 (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2026). Out of the \$549,359,974 budget posted by the WSD, allocations towards addressing chronic absenteeism must take place (Winnipeg School Division, 2026). Trustees must collectively ask themselves; “What can a budget increase provide for students if there are no students in school?” This question is a starting point for policy discussion.

8.2 Absenteeism Global Solutions: Japan

Absenteeism is a global issue, with countries all across the world reporting increasing rates of chronic student absence (Kennedy & Striethold, 2026). Japan is a country that touted a 1.5% rate of absenteeism in 2012 (Fredriksson et al., 2023). While, like other countries, the rate of absenteeism has risen over time, the degree it has risen by is notably less (Fredriksson et al., 2023). In a study done by Fredricksson et al. (2023), in 2018, only 2.1% of Japanese students reported skipping a whole day of school at least once in the 2 weeks prior to taking the PISA test, comparatively lower than other students in the same study from other countries; Germany (6%), Sweden (8.8%) and the UK (17%). One preventative action Japan undertook following the COVID-19 pandemic, as a part of their ‘COCOLO Plan (Comfortable, Customized and Optimized Locations of learning)’, was to assign more school counselors and social workers as well as establish in-school support rooms (Matsubara et al., 2025). The plan also emphasized the need to implement early-stage interventions through community efforts to identify and address individual struggling youth (Matsubara et al., 2025). The pieces of the COCOLO Plan discussed above could be implemented in Manitoba, especially when we know how dire students are in need of additional support.

9. Conclusion

The amalgamation of statistics, increased community awareness campaigns, comments from school divisions and government officials explored in this report show a desperate need for action surrounding youth at risk in Winnipeg. Early intervention efforts in schools, addressing mental health deficiencies as a crisis, appropriate funding towards pertinent public safety concerns, platforming grassroots safety and absenteeism campaigns, and culturally relevant and inclusive practices headline the blueprint for achievement. Most importantly, an approach that views the factors of risk as cumulative deprivation and factors of protection in the same light, will find that a phased, transparent and pragmatic approach to change will result in the most success in achieving youth prosperity. Addressing any domain of risk alleviates an area of cumulative deprivation that will result in a chain effect in the rest of a young person's life. Action taken by Winnipeg Police Services, local School Divisions, Manitoba Education and Early Child Development, and ministers and officials from Winnipeg, Manitoba and the Federal Government should provide hope for students, parents, teachers and community leaders. Investing in youth prosperity improves economic conditions, alleviates welfare resources, reduces crime rates and drug use, improves the quality of life in homes and communities and gives young people — the beacons of our future — hope and resilience in a changing and complicated world.

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Appendix A

Issues and Options for Working Group Discussion

This appendix is intended to support discussion rather than prescribe conference recommendations. Participants are asked to consider the evidence in the paper and identify practical actions within the authority of their assigned level of government or school board, as well as areas requiring intergovernmental or community partnership.

Working Group 1 - Federal Government

Questions for discussion

- Which existing federal programs could better support youth facing multiple disadvantages in Winnipeg?
- Where are there gaps in federal support for Indigenous youth, housing and income security, mental health and addictions, organized-crime and financial-crime enforcement, or community prevention?
- Which issues require federal-provincial, federal-municipal or federal-Indigenous partnership?
- How can federal funding be structured to support prevention in measurable outcomes?

Options raised in the paper for consideration

- Indigenous youth programming and culturally appropriate services
- Housing and income supports affecting children and families
- Organized crime, drug trafficking and financial investigation

- Federal support for community prevention, mental health and addictions

Working group output: Identify 2-3 priority actions; the lead government, board or agency; necessary partners; and actions that could realistically begin within the next 1-3 years.

Working Group 2 - Province of Manitoba

Questions for discussion

- What provincial actions could reduce chronic absenteeism and improve school attachment?
- How should Manitoba respond to youth mental-health and addictions needs, including access to services?
- What roles should provincial education, health, families and justice systems play in prevention and early intervention?
- What province-wide data and reporting are needed to measure progress?

Options raised in the paper for consideration

- Province-wide approaches to chronic absenteeism
- Mental-health and addictions access for high-risk youth
- Poverty, food insecurity and family supports
- Youth justice, prevention and cross-department coordination

Working group output: Identify 2-3 priority actions; the lead government, board or agency; necessary partners; and actions that could realistically begin within the next 1-3 years.

Working Group 3 - City of Winnipeg

Questions for discussion

- What can the City do through recreation, transit, neighbourhood services, community partnerships and public-safety policy?
- How should resources be targeted in neighbourhoods experiencing multiple disadvantages?
- What is the appropriate balance among policing, organized-crime enforcement, prevention and community-based safety initiatives?
- What local data should be reported regularly and publicly?

Options raised in the paper for consideration

- Recreation and grassroots prevention in higher-risk neighbourhoods
- Transit and access to school, services and opportunities
- Neighbourhood safety and community-based prevention
- Organized crime, drug trafficking, financial investigation and public reporting

Working group output: Identify 2-3 priority actions; the lead government, board or agency; necessary partners; and actions that could realistically begin within the next 1-3 years.

Working Group 4 - School Boards

Questions for discussion

- What should happen when a student becomes chronically absent?
- How should divisions use attendance data to identify barriers and support reintegration?

- What roles should counselors, mental-health and addictions professionals, families, community organizations and SRO/police programs play?
- What alternative educational pathways or supports are needed for students at risk of disengagement?

Options raised in the paper for consideration

- A consistent response procedure for chronic absenteeism
- Use of absenteeism data to support reintegration and alternative education
- Reducing administrative burdens that limit counsellor access to students
- Links to barrier-free mental-health, addictions, family and community supports

Working group output: Identify 2-3 priority actions; the lead government, board or agency; necessary partners; and actions that could realistically begin within the next 1-3 years.

Cross-government questions

- Which issues cannot be addressed effectively by one level of government acting alone?
- Where is responsibility currently unclear or fragmented?
- What data should be collected and reported across Manitoba and Winnipeg?
- Which protective factors can be strengthened early enough to prevent school disengagement, victimization and involvement in crime?

Appendix B

Definitions

Absenteeism

Unexcused and avoidable absences from work or school that disrupt the flow of work or education caused by unmet needs of systemic barriers ([Winnipeg School Division, Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth](#)).

Addiction

Use of a substance in a manner that is harmful to the user to varying degrees ([Center for Addiction and Mental Health](#)).

Chronic Absenteeism

Unexcused absences that make up 10% of total school days, making up about two days absent per month ([Youth Mental Health Canada](#)).

Cumulative Deprivation

When individuals within a community all fall along the bottom in terms of access to multiple “well-being dimensions” (healthcare, food, education etc.) of life at the same time ([ECINEQ](#)).

Delinquency

Socially and often legally frowned upon behaviours, such as engaging in drugs or underage drinking, or carrying out actions such as theft or destruction of property ([Department of Justice Canada](#)).

Generational Trauma

Trauma from one generation of the family that affects and is carried over to following generations ([Canadian Center For Counselling & Psychotherapy](#)).

Literacy

The ability to read, write, comprehend and understand a variety of media (literature, art,

etc.) ([Statistics Canada](#)).

Preventative Policy

A set of rules or principles that aim to prevent undesired behaviours/actions from occurring in the first place. Often through changes to education ([Center For Disease Control and Prevention](#), [The Government of Canada](#)).

Protective Factor

A characteristic, circumstance or policy that decreases the likelihood of perpetrating or becoming a victim of youth delinquency and/or violence ([Department of Justice Canada](#), [Center For Disease Control and Prevention](#)).

Restrictive Policy

A set of rules or principles that aim to remove or limit access in order to stop undesired actions/behaviours from occurring ([Department of Justice Canada](#), [Cambridge Dictionary](#)).

Risk Factor

A characteristic, circumstance or policy that increases the likelihood of perpetrating or becoming a victim of youth delinquency and/or violence ([Department of Justice Canada](#), [Center For Disease Control and Prevention](#)).

Severe Chronic Absenteeism

Unexcused absences that either a) make up 20 or more classes for a single course at the high school level or b) 20 percent or more days absent for people in Kindergarten to grade 8 in a school year ([Winnipeg School Division](#)).

Substance Use

A spectrum of use of legal or illegal substances, ranging from non-use to addiction ([The Government of Canada](#)).

Universal School Lunch Program

A provincially or federally funded program that provides free and accessible lunches to students at school without said students having to provide proof of need ([The Government of Canada](#)).

Well-Being Dimension

The multitude of factors that work together and in conjunction that affect a person's overall well-being (examples of factors include financial, physical, emotional, etc.) ([University of Waterloo](#)).

Youth at Risk

*Teenagers to young adults, aged 15-24, who are more at risk of engaging in delinquent acts due to **cumulative deprivation** [see definition of cumulative deprivation] ([Canadian Public Health Association](#)).*