

RCMP National Youth Officer Program & PREVNet Collaboration

WITS® Programs Pilot Project Final Report

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Creating responsive communities for
the prevention of peer victimization

Executive Summary

This project was built on a partnership among PREVNet researchers from Canadian universities and the RCMP National Youth Officer Program. The research was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) to facilitate and examine the feasibility of disseminating evidence-based crime prevention programs through this partnership.

Officers were recruited by the RCMP Crime Prevention Program from a list of English-speaking communities that had previously identified bullying as a concern in an RCMP survey. Commanding officers from these communities were contacted to invite participation. Officers who already had regular contact with elementary schools were chosen from communities in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and British Columbia. The RCMP members' roles were to catalyze the start-up of the WITS Programs and motivate school staff and children to participate in them.

The officers identified several *ingredients for success* in initiating the WITS Programs, including: a) active recognition of and clear support for members' program involvement from the national office and division commanding officers; b) minimal demands on RCMP members' time; c) good fit between the RCMP members' role in the programs and their existing crime prevention work; d) ease of use and accessibility of program materials; e) adequate anticipation of and preparation for member turnover due to transfers (outgoing officers trained new ones, supported by WITS community leader online training resources); f) widespread enthusiasm for the programs by teachers; and g) the officers' generosity and clear commitment to their communities.

Gaps included the need for: a) more French resources (now available); b) flexible and longer term strategies to promote teacher involvement; c) strategies for outreach to highly stressed communities and schools; d) improved access to WITS resources on RCMP networks (i.e. overcoming firewalls that block downloads); e) strategies to assist communities in fundraising for books to support the program; f) strategies to assist communities in documenting expected short-term outcomes (e.g. reductions in peer victimization and conflict, increases in social responsibility among children and youth) and long-term reductions in bullying among high school students and crimes related to interpersonal conflicts.

Recommendation

Overall the officers involved in this one-year research project expressed considerable acceptance of and enthusiasm for the evidence-based WITS Programs, and the continued dissemination of the programs through the RCMP National Youth Officer Program was strongly endorsed.

Full Report

Research has advanced the development and testing of evidence-based programs for bullying prevention in schools; however, these programs are not widely available. Inequities in access are particularly stark in rural communities. This project was built on a partnership among PREVNet researchers from Canadian universities and the RCMP National Youth Officer Program. This knowledge translation and transfer (KT) project was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) to facilitate and examine the feasibility of collaborating for the dissemination of evidence-based crime prevention programs.

Research objectives

At the outset of this project, research objectives were to:

1. Sustain communication between researchers and program users through a national partnership between: the RCMP National Youth Officer Program, which is interested in promoting the dissemination of evidence-based resources through its online resource centre; PREVNet, a national network of Canadian researchers and youth-serving non-governmental organizations; the Rock Solid Foundation (RSF), a Victoria -based not-for profit crime prevention group; and University of Victoria researchers who have worked with the RSF to develop and evaluate the WITS Programs.
2. Catalyze, oversee, and monitor the efforts of the RCMP National Youth Officer Program working in collaboration with local constables to promote uptake and monitoring of the WITS Programs in six rural communities.
3. Document strategies used at the community level to facilitate the dissemination of the WITS Programs and identify gaps that need to be addressed.
4. Provide recommendations for the next steps in building partnerships and improving program materials for nation-wide dissemination.

Background

The RCMP provides services for approximately 5,000 of the more than 16,500 schools in Canada, many of which are in hard-to-reach rural and Indigenous communities. Moreover, the RCMP Act designates crime prevention as a priority for all RCMP officers. Bullying prevention programs are badly needed to reduce youth bullying and suicides, and a unique partnership between the RCMP and university researchers is helping to address this need.

Funded by a grant from the CIHR Knowledge Translation Program, the project builds on a unique partnership that links the RCMP National Youth Officer Program with leaders of PREVNet and the RSF, as well as University of Victoria researchers.

Research Methods

RECRUITMENT

Participating officers were recruited by the RCMP Crime Prevention Program from among a list of English-speaking communities that identified bullying as a concern in detachment plans. Commanding officers from these communities were contacted to invite the participation of an officer who already had regular contact with local elementary schools. Participating communities were located in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and British Columbia. Most WITS Programs resources are available online (www.witsprogram.ca) at no cost, and participating RCMP members received all materials required for pilot program implementation, including books and take-home badges and “gifts” for students, so that costs and access to materials were not impediments to program start-up.

TRAINING

On Dec. 7, 2011, officers from remote sites across Canada came together in Ottawa to receive training on the evidence-based WITS Programs. The WITS acronym stands for **W**alk away, **I**gnore, **T**alk it out and **S**eek help – skills that young children can use to deal with bullying. The real goal of the program, however, is to create responsive communities for the prevention of peer victimization and bullying. The trained RCMP officers played a collaborative role in helping school staff, parents, and community leaders take an active and unified approach to reduce bullying in their communities. The process of implementing the WITS Programs was initiated in January 2012 and continued through the spring of that year.

DATA COLLECTION

Focus groups with the participating officers were conducted via teleconferences in February and June of 2012 and via a face-to-face meeting held in Ottawa in September 2012. All conversations were recorded with participant consent and summarized, omitting speaker names. Dr. Leadbeater led the discussions, which: reviewed the current status of the programs in each community; elicited start-up strategies used; identified key entry points in small communities (e.g. who was involved, who helped, how were they recruited); examined the role of media and other communications to the community; reviewed WITS Programs resources and activities (e.g. Swearing-In Ceremony, Tug-of-Help); and identified and worked to troubleshoot problems.

Findings

Overall, the RCMP members involved expressed considerable acceptance of and enthusiasm for implementing the WITS Programs in their communities. All communities and officers intended to continue the programs after the pilot project’s end. Support from national and division commanding officers was important. Minimal time demands and costs, as well as an appropriate fit with the RCMP members’ existing roles in their communities, added to the overall support for the programs. As is prescribed by the programs, the RCMP members’ roles involved catalyzing the programs and motivating

others to participate in their delivery, thus respecting the officers' limited available time. Involvement in the programs also increased children's positive perceptions of RCMP members and their willingness to approach them.

Focusing on the processes (rather than outcomes) and feasibility of utilizing the WITS Programs in small rural communities, detailed findings are organized around practical strategies to enhance success and deal with concerns pertaining to:



1. The need for national and divisional leadership and support
2. Guidelines for selecting RCMP members who are likely to be successful in starting up the programs
3. Guidelines for selecting communities
4. Program costs and time required from RCMP members
5. Strategies for successfully starting up the programs
6. The media's role in starting up and supporting the programs
7. Recruiting teacher participation and promoting their training
8. Accessing and evaluating program activities and materials
9. Implementing WITS and WITS LEADS
10. The need for materials in French (now available)
11. The RCMP's roles in catalysing fundraising for WITS books
12. The need for collecting statistical markers of program outcomes and impacts
13. Sustaining the programs through member transfers with a "train the trainers" model within and across communities

Detailed Findings

1. THE NEED FOR NATIONAL AND DIVISIONAL LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT

This pilot was conducted with clear support from the RCMP National Office and commitment from divisional commanding officers. These were seen as essential for member participation in the WITS Programs. District commanders also added to the programs' feasibility by selecting motivated officers and providing them the flexible schedules required for conducting the program kick-off, the Swearing-in Ceremony.

2. GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING RCMP MEMBERS WHO ARE LIKELY TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN STARTING UP THE PROGRAMS

All officers selected for the project were successful in starting the programs in their community schools. Start-up seemed easier, however, in communities where participating officers: a) had been in the community for more than six months and

already had contact with the school principal and community leadership; b) were parents of young children or had children in the targeted schools; c) saw crime prevention and connecting with schools as part of their role and had some crime prevention background; d) were comfortable with the media attention engendered by the programs; e) communicated easily with the public to create collaborations and connections; and f) were comfortable with young children and the playfulness required for conducting the Swearing-In Ceremony to initiate the programs.

3. GUIDELINES FOR SELECTING COMMUNITIES

All communities had identified bullying as a concern before the programs started, likely increasing their motivation to use the resources. Communities and schools who already had advisory groups or prevention strategies in place and schools with highly engaged principals created contexts that facilitated the RCMP's work to start up the programs. On the other hand, start-up was more difficult in communities that were highly divided or disorganized and in schools where principals were overwhelmed with other responsibilities. It may be necessary to assess community readiness and interest to take on the WITS Programs before committing RCMP members' time. Access to high-speed internet was also limited in some communities, creating delays in using online training resources.

4. PROGRAM COSTS AND TIME REQUIRED FROM RCMP MEMBERS

Most program resources are available online (www.witsprogram.ca) at no cost, and participating RCMP members received all materials required for program implementation, including books and take-home badges and "gifts" for the children, so that costs and access to materials were not impediments to program start-up. In new communities, however, fundraising to support the purchase of books for schools was identified as a necessity. The time required for program start-up and maintenance was seen as consistent with the RCMP members' existing goals in connecting with schools, but required divisional support and flexible scheduling (as well as co-operation from the weather), particularly when organizing the 45- to 60-minute Swearing-In and Tug-of-Help ceremonies at the schools.

“ One of the most important things in my opinion to getting the buy-in is to emphasize this is not a time consuming program... getting the message out that this is doable... It's not going to take hours and hours of your time. ”

5. STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFULLY STARTING UP THE PROGRAMS

Most members began by contacting school principals. In some schools, an enthusiastic counsellor, teacher, or individual appointed as community liaison became the contact who helped with scheduling and catalyzing teacher participation. Recruiting other community members (firefighters, emergency service workers, student athletes, etc.) to support the start-up ceremonies was conducted informally in casual meetings, through personal connections or drop-in

“ From my experience doing this program, going into schools, the principal and vice - principal were like, ‘yeah, yeah good idea’, and that was it. [There was no follow up] So I found the guidance counsellor, who was fantastic! ”

visits. Refusals were rare but did occur; however, the officers typically found supporters through their connections. Suggestions for success in finding support included: targeting neutral community leaders

and avoiding political figures, asking for the participation of sports or art figures either in person or through written requests, inviting well-regarded youth sports teams to participate, and recruiting new community supporters each year. A “go slow” strategy was needed in one community that was highly stressed by recent suicides and another that was dealing with long-standing conflicts and interpersonal disputes. In these communities, implementing the programs in a single year was unrealistic and additional time was allotted.

6. THE MEDIA’S ROLE IN STARTING UP AND SUPPORTING THE PROGRAMS

In these small towns, media interest in the Swearing-in Ceremony was high and inviting public support enhanced local knowledge, visibility, and acceptance of the WITS Programs. Media involvement was positive, as is evident from the stories included in the Appendix. Some members did not invite the media, as they were new to the community or did not feel ready to represent the WITS Programs in this start-up phase, but were considering this for the coming year.

7. RECRUITING TEACHER PARTICIPATION AND PROMOTING THEIR TRAINING

The RCMP’s work alone is unlikely to reduce school levels of bullying. Teachers play a central role in the everyday implementation of the programs; however, engaging them to complete the 90-minute online training met with mixed success. One school principal insisted teachers complete the training before the Swearing-in Ceremony. In some schools, enthusiastic principals, teachers or counsellors found creative ways to use WITS literature; for example, one principal began reading a book in an assembly, leaving the ending for teachers to read in their classrooms.

Recruiting youth athletes or leadership groups to read WITS books to classes was seen as a potential way to support teachers’ use of the programs; some RCMP members also read short WITS books during their classroom visits. Teachers

“ Now that more kids are involved, the parents are getting involved too. I went on to our Nation’s website the other day and I saw a comment where someone was saying something about bullying. One of the parents actually wrote and said ‘my five-year-old uses WITS, tell your eight-year-old to use WITS too’... She said it really works. ”

were motivated by RCMP class visits to increase use of WITS language. Supplying thank you gifts (e.g. mugs) for community leaders, teachers or key school liaisons might be helpful in gaining further program support.

8. ACCESSING AND EVALUATING PROGRAM ACTIVITIES AND MATERIALS

All materials were provided directly to the RCMP officers, who then delivered supplies to the schools. This helped gain support for the start-up. Members preferred the plastic badges for the Swearing-In Ceremony over paper ones. Take-home “gifts” for the children were very well-received; small fake WITS tattoos might also be useful. Members liked the large stuffed walrus and believed it supported the programs. Using the book *Walrus’s Gift* in the Swearing-In Ceremony was also supported. In order to hold children’s attention, it was recommended that a projector be used to show the pictures as the book is read. This, however, was not always available. Where time was limited, telling the story rather than reading it was an option; having teachers read the story in advance or after the ceremony was also suggested. The inclusion of children’s books with Aboriginal themes was advantageous in communities with large First Nations populations.

9. IMPLEMENTING WITS AND WITS LEADS

Implementing WITS in the schools for children in Kindergarten to Grade 3 was relatively easy. In contrast, different school configurations and the need for flexible approaches to engage some schools delayed implementation of the WITS LEADS Program for Grades 4 to 6. Suggestions for improving the use of LEADS resources included: a) conducting the Swearing-in Ceremony for all students from Kindergarten to Grade 6, then holding the Tug-of-Help Ceremony with Grades 4-6 students immediately thereafter; and b) presenting the programs as two age-appropriate versions of one program, rather than two separate programs. In one community, where children were grouped in Kindergarten to Grade 3 only, the decision was made to wait until the first year of WITS-trained third graders moved up to the fourth grade before implementing WITS LEADS.

10. THE NEED FOR MATERIALS IN FRENCH

This was identified by RCMP members in immersion schools and Francophone communities. As a result, several French books have been added to the program resources and a French adaptation of WITS called DIRE (**D**emander l’aide, **I**gnorer, **R**eculer, et **E**n parler) is available at www.witsprograms.ca/dire. Resources have been adapted for Francophone officers and school staff and are being piloted.

11. THE RCMP’S ROLE IN CATALYSING FUNDRAISING FOR WITS BOOKS

All training and most program resources are available online at no cost; however, new communities starting the programs may be deterred by the cost of books used in the classrooms. A book checklist is available online for librarians to tally available books. Ideas for local fundraising by schools, parents, band councils, etc., are also

“ WITS is easy to learn, easy to teach them ...You talk about longevity—I know where I am, when the kids get older they will have the basic foundations of what WITS is all about. So it’s an easy sell that way. ”

available. Enthusiasm for the programs, their ease of use and anticipated results were viewed as key “selling” features.

12. THE NEED FOR COLLECTING STATISTICAL MARKERS OF PROGRAM OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

The RCMP’s long-term commitment to the programs will require statistical evidence of outcomes, such as reduced child reports of peer victimization, reduced school disciplinary actions for fighting and interpersonal conflicts, and reduced calls for police assistance related to bullying in middle and high schools. Tools for monitoring local success are needed.

“ We see the benefits as we’re in the schools, but if you can’t see the numbers... they don’t want it.. If you want to keep the partnership with the RCMP, it’s definitely something you have to think about. ”

13. SUSTAINING PROGRAMS THROUGH MEMBER TRANSFERS WITH A “TRAIN THE TRAINERS” MODEL WITHIN AND ACROSS COMMUNITIES

Turnover in RCMP staff is expected due to transfers and short terms in remote locations. This must be anticipated and planned for to support the RCMP’s essential role in catalyzing and sustaining the WITS Programs. With support from the local division commanding officer, new community leaders can be recruited from among current staff, trained and introduced to schools by the outgoing member. The 60-minute online training for community leaders provides the information needed, and

“ My school will stay on board with it if I go, but if the interest does start to wane and no one is there to give them that boost again they will just move to the next program. It will go if there is not that someone there. ”

members who complete the online training receive a WITS accreditation certificate, which is adequate for starting the program. Contact lists for existing RCMP trainers in each province are also available through national and divisional coordinators.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The qualitative evidence from this pilot project clearly supports the continued implementation of the WITS Programs by the RCMP National Youth Officer Program Resource Centre. To enhance the likelihood of success for RCMP officers and community

champions who wish to implement the WITS programs, the following recommendations are advocated:

1. ASSESS COMMUNITY NEEDS

It is important that community leaders, including RCMP members, agree on priorities for addressing local social problems and have a network of individuals ready to take collective action. Informal local conversations can often lead to a consensus; national RCMP surveys of divisional concerns focused on children and youth can add support. Community advisory groups led by local governing structures may have predetermined priorities for collective action (e.g. preventing youth suicide) that could be supported by the integration of the WITS Programs.

2. CREATE CLEAR SUPPORT FROM RCMP NATIONAL OFFICE AND DIVISIONAL COMMANDING OFFICERS

In order for RCMP members to become involved in the WITS Programs in an effective and meaningful way, support from their superiors both nationally and at a divisional level is essential.

3. SUPPORT COLLABORATION AMONG RCMP MEMBERS AND KEY COMMUNITY ADVOCATES

Establish and support both formal and informal communication channels with local advisory groups or band councils and with key community child and youth advocates (e.g. principals, teachers, sports leaders, youth, other first responders) to enhance community readiness and collaboration. Strong lines of communication can provide the necessary foundation for collective action on crime prevention initiatives.

4. POST CONTACT LISTS OF EXPERIENCED WITS MEMBERS ON THE RCMP YOUTH RESOURCE CENTRE'S PUBLIC WEBSITE

Given the expected turnover in RCMP staff due to transfers, a "train-the-trainers" model is required to ensure the WITS Program's continuity within communities. Divisional commanding officers and outgoing RCMP members should engage and train their replacements. With individual member agreement, the Youth Officer Program Resource Centre website should maintain a list of experienced RCMP members willing to be contacted for training and advice.

5. IDENTIFY EXISTING AND NEEDED MARKERS TO MEASURE IMPACT OF THE WITS PROGRAMS.

Markers of success can vary depending on the stage of program implementation, local goals, and short- and long-term effects on reducing social problems. Early markers of the programs' success may include levels of: community satisfaction with the programs; awareness among children about what WITS means; use of WITS language at school; support from a champion within the school; and teacher

completion of online training. These process markers should be supplemented with “counts” of disciplinary actions in school due to peer conflicts and fights on playgrounds. Markers of improved teacher-student and student-student relationships (i.e. improved school climate), and improved social responsibility and leadership skills among students should also be considered. Long-term markers of success could include reduced calls for police assistance related to bullying in middle and high schools, reductions in suicides connected to bullying, and increased youth participation in community life and collective action. Continued collaborations with PREVNet will support this evaluation process.