

Youth at Risk in Winnipeg

Multiple Disadvantages, Public Safety, and the Policy Agenda

Executive Summary / Highlights

Aidan Perreault and Julia Ward

Research paper prepared for the October 17, 2026 Youth at Risk Conference
at Canadian Mennonite University

The Challenge

Youth at risk are not youth who are risks. They are young people facing circumstances that can limit their opportunities and harm their future potential. Poverty, mental-health and addiction problems, chronic absence from school, family instability, unsafe neighbourhoods, gangs and pressures from the digital world can overlap and reinforce one another.

In May 2026, **UNICEF ranked Canada 22nd among 37 peer countries in child and youth well-being.** The Winnipeg and Manitoba evidence reveals something equally important: **risk and disadvantage are not evenly distributed. They are heavily concentrated among particular populations, schools and neighbourhoods.**

This background paper brings together evidence scattered among government reports, school data, police statistics, community organizations and academic research to provide a factual basis for action.

Findings That Stand Out

Indigenous youth and justice. In 2024, Indigenous youth represented approximately 40% of youth in juvenile detention in Canada, although they constitute only about 8% of the Canadian youth population — roughly five times their population share. The figures demonstrate the importance of prevention, culturally appropriate intervention and addressing disadvantages before a young person enters the justice system.

Child poverty. Manitoba's child poverty rate is approximately 27%, compared with a national rate of about 18%. Poverty can interact with other risks involving mental health, substance use, school attendance and educational achievement.

The central issue is **cumulative disadvantage**: young people facing several barriers simultaneously are at substantially greater risk.

Drugs and mental health. Winnipeg Fire Paramedic Service data show that drug-related calls involving youth increased from about 24 per month in 2016 to more than 45 per month in 2025 — nearly doubling in a decade. The increase is especially concerning alongside mental-health problems and Manitoba's shortage of publicly accessible psychological services. Addiction, mental health and public safety cannot be treated separately.

Chronic absenteeism. Winnipeg School Division reported that approximately 9% of students were severely chronically absent in 2024–25, but that overall figure masks the concentration of the problem.

The 2025 Inner City Youth Alive documentary Absent reported chronic absenteeism as high as 70% in some schools. The disparity is longstanding. In 2017, two schools with roughly comparable enrolments showed dramatically different results: 161 students at St. John's High School had missed four or more classes per month, compared with only 38 at Kelvin High School.

Winnipeg School Division data show 2,656 students chronically absent in 2025–26. Of these, 1,842 (69.4%) were elementary-school students.

The central story is therefore not a Winnipeg-wide average. It is the **concentration of serious absenteeism in particular schools and neighbourhoods** and the need for intervention much earlier in children's education.

Youth and Public Safety

Youth vulnerability and public safety are closely connected. Winnipeg continues to confront gangs, drug trafficking and violence, while schools must provide safe environments for students and staff.

School Resource Officer programs continue to operate in most of Manitoba, but Winnipeg School Division discontinued its SRO program in 2021 as part of budget reductions.

The potential life-saving importance of SROs was demonstrated at Neelin High School in Brandon in June 2025. After a student armed with a sword attacked another student and threatened others, a School Resource Officer responded within approximately three minutes. Brandon's police chief credited the police response with preventing further harm.

The incident provides a concrete example of the role SROs can play in school safety, prevention, emergency response and relationships between police and school communities.

Organized Crime: Follow the Money

Organized crime in Winnipeg is not simply a street-level problem. Drug trafficking and gang activity are visible manifestations, but criminal organizations must also conceal, move and reinvest their profits. **Money laundering is therefore an important part of Winnipeg's public-safety challenge.**

Project Soft Landing, a Winnipeg Police investigation announced in 2024, resulted in search warrants in Manitoba, Ontario and British Columbia and 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 charged with offences including organized crime, drug trafficking, firearms, proceeds of crime and laundering proceeds of crime.

FINTRAC subsequently highlighted Project Soft Landing as an example of financial intelligence assisting a Winnipeg Police investigation.

The lesson is that combating organized crime requires both preventing young people from being recruited into gangs and **following the money to disrupt the financial infrastructure that makes organized crime profitable.**

What the Evidence Tells Us

The statistics point toward one overriding conclusion:

The central challenge is the accumulation and concentration of disadvantage.

City-wide and provincial averages can conceal populations, schools and neighbourhoods experiencing much more serious problems. Education, poverty, mental health, addiction and public safety therefore cannot be treated as separate policy silos.

A child who is chronically absent may simultaneously face poverty, family difficulties, mental-health problems, addiction in the household or gang recruitment. Effective intervention needs to occur **early, locally and across institutional boundaries.**

From Evidence to Action

The October 17 conference brings together educators, community leaders, public-safety experts, researchers and decision-makers to move from diagnosis to action.

Four working groups will consider what can be done by the Government of Canada, the Province of Manitoba, the City of Winnipeg and school boards to **reduce barriers, increase opportunities and enhance public safety for youth at risk.**

The evidence points toward better and more transparent data; earlier intervention when children disengage from school; accessible mental-health and addiction services; culturally appropriate supports, particularly for Indigenous youth; sustained community-based intervention; safe schools; and public-safety strategies that address both street-level crime and the financial structures of organized crime.

The objective is not simply to respond after young people have entered the justice system, become addicted, joined gangs or disappeared from classrooms. It is to **identify overlapping risks earlier and strengthen the protective factors that give young people a realistic opportunity to succeed.**