

**An Exploration of Youth Risks  
in the Caribbean,  
through the voices of youth**

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**ABSTRACT**

Unavoidable hazards exist in the Caribbean stemming from natural and environmental disasters: the spill off from using rapidly advancing technology for ill gain, the bombardment of foreign cultures through the electronic media, and the global economic crisis that is now at hand. The Literature portrays Caribbean youth as a group who are at risk to crime and gang violence, early initiation of sexual intercourse, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and attrition from the education system. This study sought to define risks through the eyes of a sample of Caribbean youth in three territories: Jamaica, Haiti, and Trinidad, using focus group methodology, consultations with targeted groups, and in-depth interviews. Youth from a range of social groups were invited to participate: youth in school and out of school, youth from affluent as well as impoverished communities, unemployed as well as employed youth, commercial sex workers, teenage mothers, hearing impaired, and youth from indigenous communities.

The youth in general, identified risk as a necessary step in psychological development but recognized the inherent elements of chance. Risk taking was associated with cultural values, survival, poverty, group membership, as well as with immaturity, although the nature of risks was expected to change with age. Risks were taken while under the influence of peers and adults and even substances, though being counter to norms and the law. Risks that appeared to be successful to some youth actually constituted deviance. Specifically in Haiti, illegal immigration stood out as a risk, and the need for food security as a recommendation.

Youth who were not engaged in risk-taking activities on the one hand are seen to be operating in fear, but on the other to be the product of effective education, taking good counsel and opportunities, and proper parenting; these were protective factors. Vulnerabilities included abduction, human trafficking, stigmatizing, victimization, crime, and exploitation of youth.

Communities themselves have been sometimes stigmatized or targeted, exposing their youth to further risks. Community cohesiveness, however, appeared as a solution to risk reduction. Some youth expressed that they have little representation and their voices were not heard so they felt no impetus to participate in risk reduction.

Some suggestions were offered by the participants in terms of building resilience in order to activate efficient life planning. Yet some youths felt hopeless and frustrated and understood while others in their milieu could be suicidal.

There was a steadfast cry among the voices, for education on identifying negative consequences of risks, for strategies for risk reduction, and for programmes on conflict resolution and anger management, for example. Youth wanted a safe place and resources and activities for their growth and development until they can adequately fend for themselves.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Study of Youth Risks and Vulnerability**

During the capture of the voices of youth in the study of Youth Dreams, Aspirations and Vulnerability in CARICOM territories (2008-2009), it appeared that there had never been an organic definition of risk that was birthed and grown to reflect Caribbean realities. A number of agencies have therefore been implementing risk reduction programmes in the Caribbean using foreign norms in the absence of a regional conceptual framework, priorities, strategies, on risk and risk-taking. It could be argued therefore that there would be no effective implementation of strategies that are intended to intervene in risky situations until these situations are clearly defined and at least roughly categorized.

### **Existing Perspective on Youth Risks in the Caribbean**

A World Bank Report on Caribbean Youth Development, 2003, summarised that risks encompassing youth unemployment, physical and sexual abuse, crime, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and substance were detrimental to development. Further to this, it was documented that youth risks can each reduce a country's production by up to 1.4% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Garcia-Verdu et al, 2008). In a more recent study that looked at the economic impact of negative behaviours among CARICOM youth, Chaaban estimates that youth crime and violence can reduce GDP by as much as 4.01% as in the case of St. Lucia (CCYD, 2009). In summary youth risks emerge as liabilities and not assets:

- Drug use among youth correlated with risky behaviour and behavioural problems.
- Youth engage in health compromising behaviours: violence involvement, illicit drug and tobacco use, and alcohol use for both genders.
- Youth display rage versus school connectedness.
- Youth initiate sexual activity quite early and this correlated with gang membership and weapon carrying.
- Youth engaged in unprotected sex and had multiple partners.
- Youth are disproportionately at risk for HIV infection

### **The Ecological Environment of Youth Risks**

The Caribbean has been at risk for natural disasters like flooding, earthquakes, annual hurricanes, and volcanoes as in Montserrat, and now we add the deleterious effect of climate change. Risks from such hazards always develop in the social contexts; setbacks, injury, homelessness, and so on. The use of the technology brings it own hazards, for example, technology has been available for illegally organizing the mobility of drugs

from South America through trans-ship locations in several Caribbean territories, as well as new types of crime for which Caribbean societies have seemed unprepared; human trafficking, and Internet scams. Global Positioning Systems, (GPS) can be used for finding locations as well as for positioning drugs or trafficked human beings. Technological hardware will leave a significant amount of e-waste to add to the pollution and dumping of unwanted materials, and expired pharmaceuticals that have sneaked into sea and borders. Housing developments, sometimes in gated communities, in ghetto areas, and in garrison establishments; rural to urban shifts in population are the order of the day. With the new access to the Internet and cable television, island communities, their families are being bombarded with streams of culture, and social dissonance from extra-regional countries, enticing gullible and impressionistic youth to adopt new lifestyles. Violation of human rights also exist as stigma and discrimination colors activities in the social landscape of race, gender, religion, and poverty.

As a result, the aim of this Study was to assess, determine, record and effectively represent the issues, situations, and circumstances that constitute youth risks through the eyes of youth in the Caribbean. The tasks at hand, sought to distil a regional definition of youth risks, and a concept of a model of youth risk, vulnerability, resilience and protection informed by youth feedback.

## **METHODOLOGY**

It was conducted through a literature review, interviews, and focus group discussion in the territories selected: in Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica, in 2008-09. Youth in each territory were trained to arrange and conduct focus group discussions with the following groups:

- Youth in schools both upper level primary and secondary settings in order to understand how situations reflect in the formal setting and the influence of the institution.
- Youth in and out of school settings to compare and contrast their counterparts in the formal education setting.
- Youth in orphan and institutional care settings who were not raised in standard family situations.
- Youth from the lower socio economic bracket and their counterparts from the higher socioeconomic bracket.
- The parents of all the youth mentioned above, where available.

Finally a research director reviewed, consolidated, and analyzed unedited written transcripts of focus group, and one-on-one sessions with approximately 250 young persons aged 15-29, male and female, 50 parents under the age of 30, and 40 *Restavecs* (in Haiti). Samples comprised a total of twelve (12) groups of a minimum of 6 from Jamaica, seven (7) from Haiti, and six (6) from Trinidad.

**Proposed questions:** The protocol of interview questions was prepared by a team comprising CARICOM officers, Youth Commissioners and Youth Ambassadors. The questions were as follows:

1. When you hear the word risk, what comes to mind?
2. What are some of the risk that young people face?
3. What are some of the risk that young people take?
4. Why do think young people take these risks?
5. What happens when young people take these risks?
6. In your community, what are the risks that have the greatest effect on you?
7. How do you deal with this?
8. In your community, are there young people that are not involved in risk taking behaviour? Why?
9. As young people, what do you fear/worry about that you feel you can't control?
10. How do you deal with this?
11. What can the community do to reduce the risk that young people face/take?

## **RESULTS**

### **Conceptualisation of Risks**

During the discussions, youth envisaged risks as actions that invited danger, or had potential for danger and harm, although both negative and positive outcomes were probable. Risks incorporated accepting challenges, sensation seeking, exposure to hazards, knowingly or unknowingly, rule breaking, mindless, negligent or inappropriate actions, sometimes without thinking of the consequences. Taking a risk meant accepting a challenge hoping for success. The idea of risk-taking was unlikely to dissuade anti-social or harmful behaviours. In fact, risk-taking was sometimes associated with achievement and status. At the same time, youth recognised that these risks can lead to serious or severe consequences as reflected in statements such as “risk is endangering your life and the life of others”.

### **Reasons for risk-taking**

Some youth were propelled to take risks to overcome impoverished circumstances, to help themselves and families, for psychological advantage over their peers, or for gaining membership in peer groups, They took advantages of opportunities for quick financial gain in life threatening circumstances. Feelings of invincibility left many youths with the notion that they would not be caught. Behaviour that brings pleasure and excitement, and inspires feelings of rebelliousness was seen to be repeated because of the satisfaction it bring. Psychological reasons why youth may engage in risk-taking behaviour were also expressed; depression, feelings of confusion or fear, low self-esteem and frustration were

identified as driving factors. Patterns of negative behaviour in the home, for example, drinking and smoking were also readily adopted.

The role of parents was also discussed. Recognizing the role of parents in providing guidance, support and setting an appropriate example; it was suggested that youth who lack the range of support from parents were likely to grow up with attitudes that favour anti-social and risk-taking behaviour.

### **Protective factors**

The research effort found that collectively, familial, social, personal and academic factors (access to education and learning opportunities) were all protective against risk-taking behaviour. The features preventing risk-taking were evident in youth who had strong morale, proper upbringing, religion and spirituality, good family circumstances and/or good support from parents. Youth who had children also had their children to live for. They knew beforehand, the consequences of negative actions.

The presence of alternative structured activities also arose as a significant protective factor. Youth who are able to find “positive” things to do, who had the desire to avoid risky situations and negative peer groups were also less likely to engage in risky behaviour. *“The ones who know who to ‘lime’ with...they don’t drink and rob or in the gang violence thing”.*

Protective factors were generated by the attainment of a level of education as well as life experience. Young people who have a certain level of education were perceived as having greater access to opportunities. They would therefore be more likely to complete school with skills and transition smoothly into the labour market, be financially independent and have a stable life. Participants expressed the view that *“those youth with the opportunities that we didn’t get”* would not be engaged because they would not need to. Underscoring the view that youth are rational beings, it was also discussed that persons who have experienced danger or been exposed to risk would have the capacity to better weigh their options and make the right decision. This is embodied in the phrase *“Sometimes they know someone who took a risk and it didn’t work out for them really so they learn”.*

Once again, they saw overly cautious, or harm avoidance behaviour through a dual lens that could be both positive and negative. On one hand, protective behaviour was sometimes seen by youth as stalling one’s growth: *“...because they have no objective and one must risk, in order to succeed or fail.”* while on the other hand they saw it bringing negative consequences; *“Yeah, they see it as trying not to die from dealing drugs and ting but now them same people who innocent getting rob and being victims.”*

Family connectedness, cohesiveness, strong family bonds and positive parenting practices were found to have protective associations against youth risk-taking behaviour. Youth who were perceived to have a sound upbringing, sense of spirituality or religious background and stable family circumstances were described as less likely to be involved

in risk taking behaviour. Statements such as “*some listen to their parents*”, “*some really appreciate their lives*”, “*they don’t want to embarrass their families*”, suggested that communication practices and high parental expectations could serve as effective protective factor. Interestingly, it was found that young people who became parents, and now had a greater sense of responsibility were also likely to avoid risky situations.

### Consequences of risks

Although there was recognition that taking risks carried an element of chance, youth interviewed were quite conscious of some of the consequences of risks. Those consequences could be categorised, in no order of priority, in the following outline:

CAUSE-CONSEQUENCE	
1. Stress	A consequence of feelings of anxiety about the outcome
2. Victimization	Youth become vulnerable to robbery, physical attack or other form of abuse if they inebriated, under the influence of a substance (drug). They may
3. Death	Youth may find themselves in situations where they are killed as a result of a decision to commit a violent act or cumulative dangerous acts (committing robberies, gang violence etc)
4. Paranoia or lack of trust	Youth may become sceptical of their future and of the persons in their social environment. They lose trust in the state, the media, the wider society and their neighbours because of the perceived lack of access to opportunities which have driven them to engage in the risky behaviour.
5. Isolation from family and friends	May lose trust in the state, family and friends or choose to isolate themselves for self-protection or the protection of their family. In some cases, their behaviour may have resulted in their family disowning them.
6. Low Motivation	This may arise from failure when taking risks.
7. Academic Failure/ Illiteracy	A consequence of failing of dropping out of school or truant behaviour.
8.	
9. Pregnancy, HIV /AIDS, STDS or STIs	A consequence of health-compromising behaviour such as multiple partners and sex without protection.
10. Youth Poverty	As a consequence of failing to take risks, to pursue opportunities, to take chances.

It was interesting to note that youth were more conscious of the negative consequences of risk. There was very little reference to the success, status, or other positive outcomes that may arise although consideration was given to these issues as responses to other questions.

### Coping Strategies

When asked how they dealt with or coped with the feelings of insecurity or fears; youth participants identified several coping strategies that they employed in dealing with these challenges. The feedback from youth showed the kinds of conditions and circumstances

they currently have to negotiate and navigate; high crime, low income issues, drug use, absence of role models inter alia. The statements show that stress was ever-present, ranging from hassles experienced almost daily (bullying, problems with siblings) to specific stressors such as economic deprivation. The strategies ranged from the choices about friendships, to those that they used to protect themselves, to their attitude to others, to respect, to their orientation towards the future, to work ethic, to successful role-models and to education. These findings confirm that many factors influence an individual's resilience. The implications of these findings are that, in order to support youth, especially those in a high-risk environment to cope with their challenges, the focus should be not only on reducing risk and increasing interest levels in certain activities, increasing education, and protective factors.

It was suggested that "liming" or associating with older persons or persons with strong religious backgrounds was a good strategy because these persons who could be categorised as "good" exerted a positive influence. Those persons did so by acting as a sounding board, providing motivation and inspiration. The mutual responsibility in relationships, being someone who could be trusted and confidential, was seen as important to maintaining the friendship.

Listening to conscious music was also presented as a means of escaping the realities of the situation. Music, art and culture seemed to offer relief, pleasure and a diversion from stress. Praying was also offered as a strategy utilised.

Specifically, they were very aware of the dangers in their community and have managed those dangers by making adjustments to their regular schedules. This could include changing ordinary routes of walking in order to avoid suspicious persons, avoid dressing in short clothes, exercising indoors as opposed to running on the streets, avoiding going out late at night or at all, and engaging in social activities in groups.

Precautionary behaviours in effect were suggested: trying to be always careful, going to parties as distractions, trying to deal with situations fearlessly, and some avoidance strategies, like staying at home, limiting time for social activities, *and finding distractions like going to parties.*

On the contrary, while some felt capable of handling the stressors in their environments and remained optimistic about the future, others had become despondent. The responses however, beg the question: Are they really coping well? If the avoidance strategies lend themselves to complete avoidance of neighbours and ultimately isolation, this situation cannot be very healthy for youth whose positive development relies heavily on integration within the social environment. From a risk management perspective, it is important to note that young people in this process projected feelings of despair and anxiety. Although resilient, their statements suggested fragility, vulnerability, paranoia and suspicion. There are concerns about the future, the pre-eminence of death, uncertainty about income earning potential, and about the strength of relationships.

☐ *"Life is just so hard you have to 'fraid you get AIDS, 'fraid you get shoot, 'fraid you get rob, this life just so hard, you always have to do something, it just so hard, you have to live for God and hope for the best."*

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### **Youth Vulnerabilities**

Vulnerabilities suggest detrimental actions that youth engage in as well as actions that are forced on youth. Youth in the study were aware of all the negative effects that youth are vulnerable to when they find themselves in risk-taking contexts. There is a consciousness that risks were pervasive. Personal circumstances also engendered specific vulnerability. Disabled youth felt forgotten since resources were not accessible to them. Indigenous youth wanted access to education. Respondents describe their sense of vulnerability in the environment of crime:

*"Them young boy bandits just approaching and want my car more than I want it. I may give the keys but there are so many things that may affect what happens at that moment. I may want to respond with violence and not see his gun, or the way he steps to me may be with violence first, but there is just no telling what will happen at the most unexpected time." And "I can do something but I'm afraid they kill me".*

Some respondents expressed their vulnerability and concerns as follows:

- *If I work hard, do all the right things. Have a good job etc, then everything collapses, I get tricked and lose everything.*
- *But if you work on a job site and a boss not paying you ... what else you would feel to do but rob somebody else? It's a job.*
- *How I will die – stabbed? Shot? Like a dog in the road?*
- *Will lost opportunities ever come again, will I overcome my mistakes. This deportee says: will I ever go back to the US.*
- *Am I at the junction God expected me to be?*

The lists of vulnerabilities emerging in the study have been placed in Table 1.

**Table 1: List of Vulnerabilities**

<b>List of Youth Vulnerabilities</b>	
Arrest and detention	Abuse
Abduction	Conflicts
Accidental death	Corruption
Being shot	Discrimination
Brutality	Harassment
Drinking and smoking	Hassling
Drunk driving	Inadequate pay or salary
Exploitation	Infection
Flogging	Liming
Getting pregnant	Malnutrition
Human trafficking	Molestation
Illegal migration	Poor parenting
Inappropriate locations/ hang-outs	Prostitution/ sex work
Kidnapping	Sexual harassment
Murder	Speeding
Parental neglect	STI/STDs/HIV/AIDS
Parental divorce	Stigmatization
Rape	Suicide
Unemployment	Un-employability
Unemployability	Violence
Unprotected sex	Wrongful accusation

## Identifying Risks in the Community

Traffic accidents, speeding, and drinking and driving were among the risks that existed in the community. Risks in the community were evidently associated with the category of community. For the well-to-do youth, there was the risk of being confronted by persons who target their community with acts of crime: murder, violence, and robbery. For those who happened to live in dysfunctional communities, they could be mistaken for criminals, subject to threats and street violence, wilfully reported though innocent, continually be robbed of personal items, or pressured to join gangs.

☒ Poor representation on youth issues was captured in these statements: “*People who are paid to deal with youth problems behind a desk don’t see what young people face.*”

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Dysfunctional communities were depicted in the following terms:

- *It hurts you living in a ghetto area with bars, vagrants on the street, dilapidated housing, smoking dirty galvanized walls, you think what’s the difference between the vagrant and me; ... nothing happens, hurts enough to kill, pain is so bad, I could commit suicide,.. prestige is not a reality, can’t see past the vagrants.*
- *Treason, hypocrisy, plotting, prostitution, nutritional problems, immorality and corruption (were highlighted in Haiti)*
- *In my community we didn’t grow up there and it is a place where drug dealers and gangs recruit young men in the area. Since they look at you and see you are different they believe that because you have they make you a target for being taxed based on the way you look.*

## Recommendations from Respondents

To reduce the risks that young people face and or take in the community, a number of recommendations were offered, among them, the need for community togetherness and cohesiveness, and new approaches to the sense of community building that are now required. Suggestions ranged from giving support to the police, and reporting crime, developing bonds with dons, elders and other residents, creating community watch groups, alarm and security systems, and in general looking out for others.

In general, recommendations that arose from this consultative process from the respondents themselves were categorised in relation to the Individual, the Family, the School, and the Community as follows:

### *Individual Level*

1. Engage in supportive and positive relationships with peers.
2. Increase spirituality
3. Complete school.

### **Family**

1. Family education programme to include risk reduction.
2. Implement parent training programmes with resources provided for continuity of learning.

### **School**

1. Greater supervision and monitoring of truants and children with problem behaviours
2. Create “safe places” or “safe zones” in and around schools

### **Community Level**

1. Increase efforts to build community cohesion focussing on building relationships between neighbours and increasing supervision for the children and youth of the community.
2. Specific to the youth in the community was the need for youth programmes and clubs, whether they be income- generating, on education and training, sports and life skills, that appeal to youth, against a backdrop of educating all the families in the entire community on how to deal with the risk situations and even to avoid them.
3. Design and implement youth development programmes that are relevant to the changing needs of youth. These programmes should combine skill development with building social and personal competence
4. Increase community safety that would include improved interaction with the police.
5. ‘Some communities go about things the wrong way, they need to look at what appeals to the youth, and then strategize what will work and assist, don’t just jump and say education or information. Find out what gets to youth and work from there’.
6. Establish youth clubs and learning facilities so that youth can have access to structured safe recreational programmes
7. Increase community-level employment opportunities for youth.
8. Create opportunities for youth expression
9. Creation of more technical centers for youths that do not have requirements to be admitted to university (Haiti).
10. Provide community programmes for youth to participate whether it be: income generating, education and training, sports and life skills.
11. Mentoring really helps the youngsters as they always need advice, good advice from experienced persons.
12. Programmes should address consciousness-raising, conflict resolution and anger management, sensitization and mobilization against risks, parenting, increasing the capacity for enrollment at technical and higher levels.
13. Support programmes for parents were suggested as well giving parents guidelines for relating with children
14. At the community level, programmes could be youth -led, or involve a workforce of young persons in community projects..

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The respondents suggested ways in which they themselves could contribute; among these were – educating themselves, and even by trying to arrange for other groups to respond to their community needs for job recruits, personally develop themselves so that they can positively influence other youth. They also saw the need for a wider perspective on their circumstances and not restrict their ideas to the community but extend their considerations to activities in the society as a whole.

## **CONCLUSION**

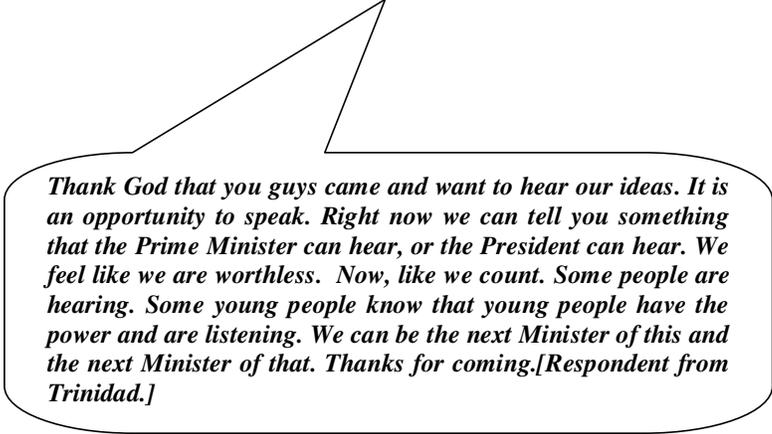
Considering youth to be an asset and not a liability, the youth consultative process engaged in this Study, demonstrated that youth are negatively impacted by hazards in their communities and their societies. Throughout the discussions, the sample of youth, identified hazards to which they were exposed, specifically to the psycho-social and economic disruption that has been taking place in the Caribbean in general; including those related to loss of life, and damage to the psyche and to their well-being. They have been able to recount the human induced vulnerabilities that face them, the risks they undertake during their development, their coping mechanism and report on Youth development reactions, as they aspire toward self-reliance and adulthood. They have identified various forms of risk and in instances, the current protective factors that have been mustered to support youth whom they think have positive experiences of growing up and development. Youth Risks, emerging from these voices, capture the need for tremendous support from governments and community groups for youth development programmes to assist youth as they wade through this period of their life span.

Subsequently, national consultations and quantitative surveys ought to be conducted in other CARICOM states to determine the extent of risk-taking engaging their youth, with risk reduction programmes in mind, adequately supported by improvements in protective factors. The efforts would be supported by Youth Policy and related new legislation.

The World Bank publication previously referenced suggested the following recommendations for at- risk youth:

- integrated early childhood development for children from poor households,
- secondary school completion,
- school-based prevention and remediation programs,
- youth-friendly health and pharmaceutical services,
- use of the media for prevention messages (combined with improved services),
- improved care-giving, and
- monitoring of indicators to track progress.

In comparison with the recommendations from the World Bank, there are evidently differing requisites for problem-solving emerging from the participants in this inquiry. The exploration highlights the need for investments in youth instead of investments in the fall-out when risks are not properly identified and addressed. Throughout the study, respondents were mildly surprised that their contributions were elicited, and their voiced could be given opportunity for expression. In the words of a participant in the focus group discussions:

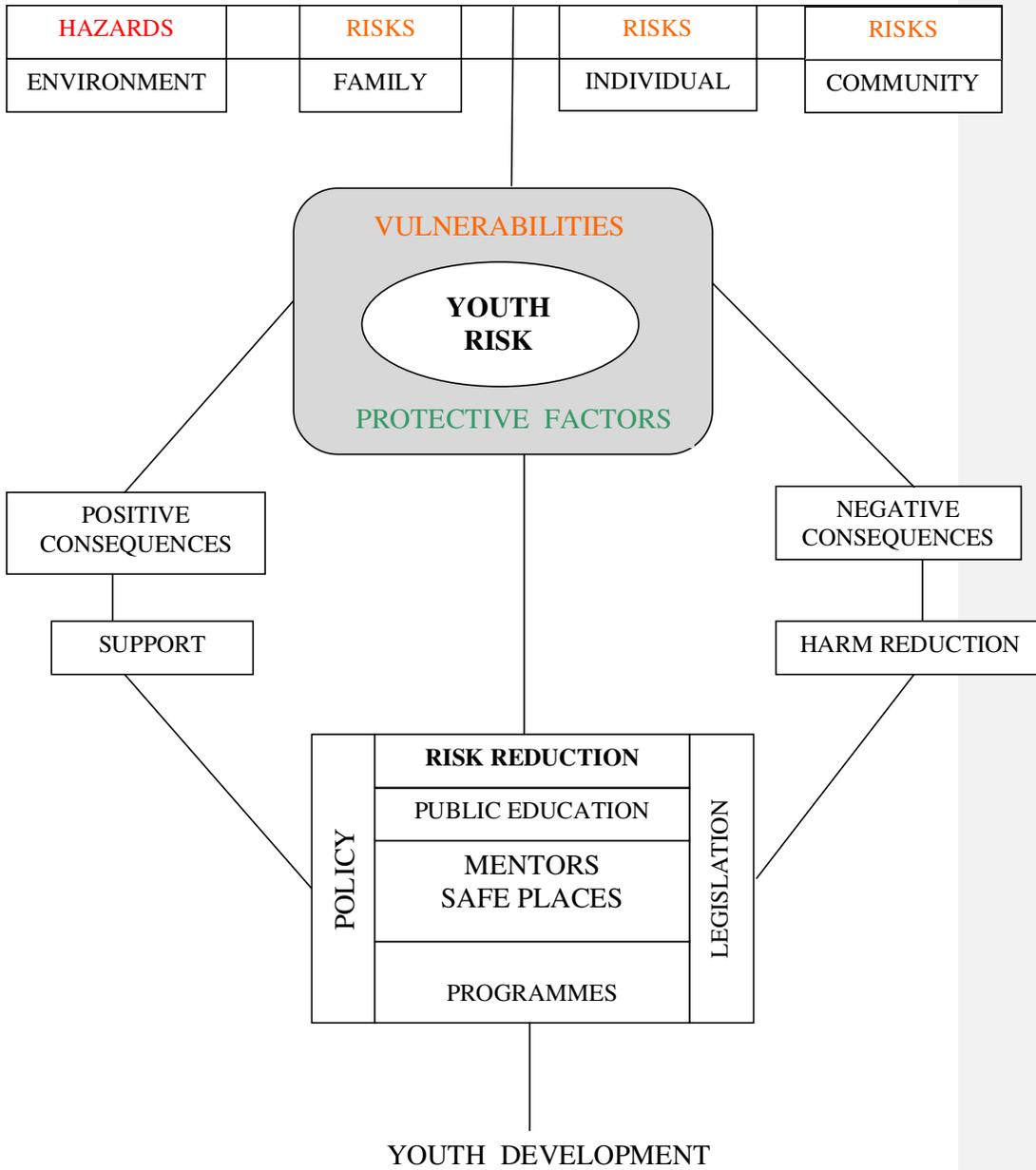


*Thank God that you guys came and want to hear our ideas. It is an opportunity to speak. Right now we can tell you something that the Prime Minister can hear, or the President can hear. We feel like we are worthless. Now, like we count. Some people are hearing. Some young people know that young people have the power and are listening. We can be the next Minister of this and the next Minister of that. Thanks for coming.[Respondent from Trinidad.]*

*This study was conducted as an aspect of the work of the  
CARICOM Commission on Youth Development.*

From the exploration a Model of Youth Risk emerges:

**CHART: MODEL OF YOUTH RISK**



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