

PROJECT FACT SHEET

Thriving Research: The International Resilience Project and At-Risk Children and Youth

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We see their faces every day in newspapers and on television. All over the world, children and young people are growing up in adversity, struggling to cope with violence, addiction, illness, and poverty. Many of us wonder how these vulnerable children deal with such harsh circumstances and how living in such difficult conditions affects their growth and development.

A team of resilience researchers is wondering, too, and is exploring just how at-risk children strive and survive in adversity.

The International Resilience Project (IRP), led by Michael Ungar, Associate Professor at the Dalhousie School of Social Work, has brought together a diverse team of researchers, clinicians, community workers, and child advocates from over 25 countries including Colombia, the United States, China, Russia, Israel, Palestine, The Gambia, Tanzania, South Africa, and Canada. The project, now entering its second phase, takes a mixed-methods, culturally sensitive approach and includes a wide range of expertise from the fields of social work, psychiatry, health statistics and measurement, psychology, medical anthropology, education, medicine, and epidemiology.

“We are seeking to unravel the mystery of why some children not only survive under difficult circumstances but actually thrive and why other children and youth are not able to effectively cope with the adversities that they face,” says Dr. Ungar.

In its first three years, the IRP collected data from more than 1500 children around the world aged 12-19. Despite their different living situations and environments, these youth are dealing with making the eventual transition to adulthood and all face similar risks such as homelessness, addiction, abuse, and mental illness. Besides learning the stories at-risk youth have to tell by collecting information from them directly through interviews or questionnaires, resilience researchers also interviewed community elders who had overcome difficult childhoods for their perspectives on how they managed to thrive.

Among their many key findings, the International Resilience Project team learned that the outcomes and adversity faced by children and youth vary considerably across cultures and communities. The researchers also found that even when faced with similar difficulties, there is a large variation in how children cope.

As the International Resilience Project enters its next phase, researchers will seek to understand these variations within a highly culturally specific context. Upcoming full-scale research will further examine the survival strategies and personal characteristics of vulnerable children globally and develop an understanding of resilience as both an individual characteristic and a community trait.

To understand how vulnerable children around the world cope and survive, the IPR team believes that a new definition of resilience is needed, one that recognizes both the child's own role in creating health and the relational, social, and cultural factors that must be present in order to support an at-risk child's development. "Resilience is perhaps best understood as an individual's capacity to navigate health resources and a condition of the individual's family, community, and culture to provide these resources in culturally meaningful ways," says Dr. Ungar.

The IPR team has been sharing its evolving understanding of resilience and of how resilience is understood across different cultures. In 2005, the IRP hosted the *Pathways to Resilience International Conference*, which was attended by national and international delegates.

A model for cross-discipline international collaboration, the IRP team plans to work to enhance the capacity of the project's collaborators to apply the research findings directly.

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