

Youth Risky and Antisocial Behaviors in Newfoundland and Labrador: The Perspectives of Young People

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Abstract

What do young people know about youth risky and antisocial behaviors (RASB) and what do they suggest could be done to address these behaviors? Although there is much literature on youth RASB, there has been little qualitative exploration of the question stated here. The current study aimed to broach the question and to fill the gap. The study contributes to extant literature by exploring types of RASB among youth, reasons for these behaviors, and possible ways to address them from the perspectives of young people in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). Constructivist and interpretive perspectives where reality is determined through the social processes of subjectivity and intersubjectivity informed the study. Eighteen young people aged 15 to 24 years participated in three focus group discussions (FGD), and data were analyzed thematically. The three main themes resulting from the process were: (1) a spectrum of behaviors, which comprised six types of behaviors; (2) constructed explanations, where participants identified five possible reasons for RASB; and (3) suggested interventions, which comprised three subthemes on interventions to address youth RASB. The findings and their implications for further research and for policy and practice are discussed.

Plain language summary

Youth risky and antisocial behaviors in Newfoundland and Labrador

This study contributes to current literature by finding out the types of risky and antisocial behaviors among youth, reasons or explanations for these behaviors, and what measures could be put in place to help youth overcome these negative behaviors. The study was conducted in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Eighteen young people aged between 15 and 24 years participated in focus group discussions to provide data for the study. Following data analysis, we discovered six antisocial behaviors, five reasons for these behaviors, and three suggested measures to address these behaviors. The findings are very useful for professional practice and for further research on youth antisocial behaviors in Newfoundland and Labrador and in Canada.

Keywords

youth, antisocial behaviors, risky behaviors, suggested interventions, Newfoundland and Labrador

Introduction

Research on risky and antisocial behaviors (RASB) among youth has grown in prominence (Baharudin et al., 2011; Basen-Engquist et al., 1996; K. K. Childs & Sullivan, 2013; K. Childs et al., 2011; Chun & Mobley, 2010; Dembo et al., 2010; Hair et al., 2009; Ward et al., 2021) because it is of keen interest to policy makers, the juvenile justice system, and child protection

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professionals. Scholarship on youth RASB is premised on the belief that although not a homogeneous population, youth is a uniquely problematic period whereby many young people engage in aggressive, experimental, and oppositional behaviors (Arnett, 1999; K. K. Childs & Sullivan, 2013; Perren & Hornung, 2005; Sullivan et al., 2010), and are portrayed as suffering from a “disorganization of their personal and familial lives” (Kurtz et al., 1991, p. 310). A spectrum of RASB highlighted in existing research includes running away from home and becoming street-involved (Glowacz et al., 2020; Hail-Jares et al., 2021; Karabanow, 2003, 2008; K. Kelly & Caputo, 2007; O’Grady et al., 2020; Owen et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2002), engaging in unsafe sexual activities (J. M. Francis et al., 2019; Manu et al., 2022; Odimegwu & Ugwu, 2022; Tarkang et al., 2019; Wagenaar et al., 2018; Yazdi-Feyzabadi et al., 2019), alcohol and drug use (J. M. Francis et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2016; Ochoa et al., 2005; Pape & Rossow, 2004; Small et al., 2017; Werb et al., 2008; Yazdi-Feyzabadi et al., 2019), refusing to continue schooling, and engaging in other forms of criminal activity (Beck et al., 2019; Farrington & Welsh, 2006; Goldsmith, 2008; Sadler, 2008; Smith et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2010; Ward et al., 2021). Policy makers and professionals are concerned that by these behaviors, youth are a risk to themselves (Gangamma et al., 2008; Heerde et al., 2020; Hughes, 2011; Liljedahl et al., 2010; Munford & Sanders, 2008) and to society (Brown, 2013; Crawford & Lister, 2007; J. Francis, 2021; Goldsmith, 2008; P. Kelly, 2003; Kennelly, 2011; Manders, 2009; Murray et al., 2021). This concern is predicated on the notion that RASB are “socially damaging and typically demonstrated through a lack of consideration for others, intentionally or through negligence” (Baharudin et al., 2011, p. 510; Berger, 2003). Here, risk is conceptualized as “the increased likelihood of problems in development” and risk factors are characteristics “of an individual or group” that expose them to problems” (Monn et al., 2013, p. 2), including mental and physical health problems (Elze, 2002; Gangamma et al., 2008) and incarceration (Ochoa et al., 2005). As a result, many youth are believed to have little prospects for labor force participation or successful transition to adulthood (Osgood et al., 2010; Piquero, Farrington et al., 2010; Piquero, Shepherd et al., 2011).

The gap in existing literature is that RASB are viewed as an objective reality that is studied by neutral observers, and youth are used as guinea pigs in the study of these behaviors. This positivist orientation to studying RASB in extant literature misses the importance of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and personal agency in knowledge production within the subculture of youth. The current study aims to bridge this gap in theorizing RASB

among youth, using young people in NL as an entry point. The purpose of the study is to draw from social constructionist perspectives (Adorjan, 2019; Dello Buono, 2015; Harris, 2006) to understand RASB among youth from the perspectives of young people. Specifically, the study explores (1) what young people identify as RASB among youth, (2) what young people identify as reasons or explanations for these behaviors among youth, and (3) what young people think could be done to address RASB among youth. In this study, RASB are not studied and interpreted as the objective characteristics of youth. On the contrary, the study positions young people as having the agency of subjectivity and intersubjectivity to help us better “frame” (Best, 2015) RASB and to identify interventions to address them. The significance of the study is that it fills a gap in knowledge on RASB among youth from the unique perspectives of young people in the larger context of Canada, and in the specific context of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL).

For purposes of this study, youth is defined as “persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions ...” (United Nations, n.d., p. 1). According to the United Nations (n.d.), youth is a “period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood’s independence. That’s why, as a category, youth is more fluid than other fixed age-groups. Yet age is the easiest way to define this group ... in relation to education and employment” (p. 1).

Literature Review

Existing research on youth RASB has built knowledge on three focal areas: co-occurrence and characteristics of these behaviors (Abby et al., 2007; Adams et al., 2014; Eaton et al., 2007; King et al., 2012; Manu et al., 2022; Sears et al., 2007; Shi et al., 2020; Wagenaar et al., 2018); correlates, predictors or risk and protective factors (Bacon et al., 2018; Baharudin et al., 2011; Beck et al., 2019; Berti & Pivetti, 2019; K. K. Childs et al., 2022; Clemente et al., 2008; Crocetti et al., 2016; J. M. Francis et al., 2019; Hofmann & Müller, 2018; Lee et al., 2016; Logan-Greene et al., 2023; Monahan et al., 2014; Odimegwu & Ugwu, 2022; Park et al., 2013; Reyes, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2019; Small et al., 2017; Su et al., 2011; Waller et al., 2014; Yazdi-Feyzabadi et al., 2019); and health and other negative outcomes (Canino et al., 2022; Choi et al., 2016; Cook et al., 2015; Edwards et al., 2019; Greenberg & Lippold, 2013; Paradis et al., 2016; Villalobos-Gallegos et al., 2020). This literature is briefly reviewed to pave way for the current study.

In the area of co-occurrence, existing research has shown that physically, psychologically, and sexually risky behaviors (Sears et al., 2007), or internalizing and

externalizing behavior problems (Shi et al., 2020), usually co-occur in youth and adolescents. Specific RASB found to co-occur in youth include alcohol use, marijuana use, and risky sexual practices, especially in adolescents with histories of dating violence (Eaton et al., 2007). Indeed, the most frequently reported co-occurring behaviors are alcohol use and risky sexual behaviors (Abby et al., 2007; Adams et al., 2014; King et al., 2012; Quinn & Fromme, 2010). A systematic review by Wagenaar et al. (2018) suggests that alcohol use and risky sexual behaviors among youth are mutually reinforcing and have common underlying factors. There is much literature in the area of correlates, risk, and protective factors. For example, recent research has reported that childhood family and community adversity, such as abuse, poverty, and exposure to violence, predicts youth RASB, but that factors such as family functioning, positive parenting, and supportive social connections have the effect of decreasing these behaviors (Baharudin et al., 2011; Berti & Pivetti, 2019; K. K. Childs et al., 2022; Diaz et al., 2020; Hofmann & Müller, 2018; Lee et al., 2016; Logan-Greene et al., 2023; Salo et al., 2022; Waller et al., 2014). Neighborhood characteristics, including residential instability, racial and ethnic discrimination, and negative media exposure have also been associated with RASB (Beck et al., 2019; Clemente et al., 2008; Odimegwu & Ugwu, 2022; Park et al., 2013), whereas religiosity is said to be a protective factor (J. M. Francis et al., 2019). A systematic review by Yazdi-Feyzabadi et al. (2019) identified predictors of RASB to include older age, being male, low religiosity, self-esteem problems, parental absence, peer pressure, and lack of recreational opportunities. On health and other negative outcomes, Paradis et al. (2016) found, among subgroups of youth, that persistence in RASB into young adulthood or through the adolescent years was associated with various health issues, such as cardiovascular, cancer, and respiratory problems. Other studies have reportedly found a link between adolescent RASB and suicidal behavior and substance use disorders (SUD) (Villalobos-Gallegos et al., 2020), between RASB and major depressive disorders (MDD) and SUD (Canino et al., 2022; Choi et al., 2016; Cook et al., 2015), and between RASB and anxiety and depression (Edwards et al., 2019).

The Current Study

A social constructionist lens

In contrast to the positivist stance in much of the existing literature where RASB are viewed as an objective reality that is independent of the observer as well as of context and time, the current study explores RASB with a social constructionist lens. According to social constructionism, reality is socially constructed or mediated through

human subjectivity and intersubjectivity; the reality of a phenomenon is what it is interpreted or framed to be by, and makes sense to, members of a given social context at a given historical moment (Best, 2015; Dello Buono, 2015; Harris, 2006; Pfohl, 2004; Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985). In social constructionism, reality is a moving target; its identification, definition and interpretation reside in human agents and are mediated by contextual and temporal nuances (Best, 2015; Pfohl, 2004). Social constructionism holds that “*meaning is central to social life*” but “*meaning is not inherent*,” and that “*human beings live in socially constructed realities*—in worlds of objects whose meaning is indeterminate until ordered in social interaction” (Harris, 2006, p. 224, italics in original). Although social constructionism has been criticized for what is believed to be “its ‘ontological gerrymandering’... its opportunistic or selective relativism in ontological grounding,” it is a well suited social science approach for “capturing the subjective complexity of human agency” (Dello Buono, 2015, p. 334; Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985). As Pfohl (2004, p. 62) has stated:

... the social constructionist perspective [has] carved out a conceptual space for a radical reading ... of social problems as nothing but the cultural, political, and material effects of the human struggle for the organization of power in ... history. Within this space we are invited to imagine that those “things” we experience, define, and react to as problematic are in “fact,” never independent of the differentiating social practices which produce them.

Social constructionism is therefore a suitable perspective for the current study’s exploration of RASB among youth from the perspectives of young people. Although some strands of constructionism have been accused of working with unacknowledged positivist assumptions (Troyer, 1992), it is important to be cognizant of Rafter’s (1992) caution that the “drive to avoid objectivism at all cost is unfortunate” or unwarranted since constructionism is not a “puritanical” but a pragmatist perspective (p. 38). This study draws guidance from Harris’ (2006) explication. Using the study of inequality as an example, Harris (2006) outlines 10 differences between constructionist and non-constructionist research. Two of these differences are the following: (1) “A constructionist researcher would tend to refrain from assuming that inequality is an obvious, objective fact. Instead, they would bracket the existence of inequality in order to study people’s diverse interpretations of inequality...” (p. 225); and (2) “Constructionist researchers would tend to avoid making claims about what they believe to be clear examples of real inequality; instead, they would study how their respondents interpret indeterminate situations as putative examples of inequality” (p. 226). In line with the foregoing, this study makes no assumptions about

the determinate nature of RASB, but relies on the interpretive agency of participants to identify, define, and describe these behaviors (Best, 2015).

Design

Consistent with constructionist perspectives (Best, 2015; Harris, 2006; Pfohl, 2004; Rafter, 1992), this study was designed as qualitative inquiry which used the focus group discussion (FGD) approach (Morgan, 1996, 2012). The study explored three main questions as follows: (1) what are some behaviors that young people in our communities may engage in that you think are risky and/or antisocial? (2) What do you think are some reasons for these behaviors among young people? (3) What do you think society can do to help address these behaviors among young people? The benefits of the FGD approach in this study was that it not only allowed individuals to share their knowledge on RASB, it also allowed participants to help one another frame these behaviors, reflect on possible reasons for these behaviors, and thinking of ways to address them. The openness of the discussions and group synergy allowed for the elicitation of much richer information than might have been possible in individual interviews (Bell et al., 2023; van den Hoonaard & van den Scott, 2022).

Methods

Participants

A sample of 18 participants provided data for this paper. They were a subset of a sample of 23 youth aged 15 to 24 years who had participated in a broader study to talk about their experiences with community-based social inclusion services (see Issahaku & Adam, 2022). The sample was recruited through a poster invitation and through personal solicitation at various locations in the city. Although participants were a self-selected (convenient) sample, the sample was purposive and participants met the criteria for selection. To be included in the study, one had to be within the age range of 15 and 24 years and be able to communicate in English as well as provide voluntary consent. Ten of the participants were in high school and the rest were in postsecondary or other educational settings. By race or ethnicity, participants were predominantly White; only 3 of the 18 were Black. We did not collect data on family socioeconomic status (SES), so we cannot describe participants' SES. However, as it emerged in the findings, we know that participants came from a wide range of SES, including families living in poverty and having contact with child protective services.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Focus Groups.

Group	Size	Age range	Gender	Race
FGD #1	6	15–17	Female 3 Male 3	Black/Other 2 White 4
FGD #2	6	18–20	Female 3 Male 3	Black/Other 1 White 5
FGD #3	6	21–24	Female 3 Male 3	Black/Other 0 White 6

Data Collection

Data for this paper were collected through FGD sessions. Eighteen youth joined their peers in groups to discuss the three questions reported in this paper. They were put into three mixed gender groups of equal size belonging to three mutually exclusive age groups, as shown in Table 1. The Principal Investigator (PI) who moderated the group discussions has group practice experience and teaches social work practice with groups. During each FGD session, discussion started after the moderator had: (1) introduced the research topic and outlined the main questions; (2) clarified that the purpose was to explore participants' knowledge and that everyone's knowledge was equally valid and valued; and (3) established the norm that participants would respect and avoid speaking over one another. The discussion involved the moderator posing a main question and follow-up questions, as participants built on each other's ideas in their responses. A youth-friendly community-based agency provided a convenient space for the FGD sessions. On average, a session lasted about 1 hr. The information was audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional. The first author's home university ethics review board provided ethics clearance for the study (ID #20180353-SW). Each participant signed an informed consent form that was approved by the ethics review board.

Data Analysis

The first author conducted the main task of data analysis and regularly discussed emerging findings with the other authors. According to Nyumba et al. (2018), methods for analyzing focus group data include grounded theory, content analysis, discourse analysis, and coding for key ideas and themes—thematic analysis. In this study, data were analyzed drawing on techniques of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and coding for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Since the focus was on establishing themes or meaning categories that constituted answers to the research questions, the more

accessible option of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020) was adopted. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is “compatible with both essentialist and constructionist paradigms” and “provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data” (p. 78). First, each group transcript was read several times to familiarize with the content. Following familiarity, initial coding was conducted. In each transcript, important statements in response to the research questions were extracted. Priority was first given to group consensus statements—responses that seemed widely shared by group participants. Then attention was given to minority views—ideas expressed by one or a few group discussants. Important words or phrases in the text were used as codes that served as pointers to meaningful statements or passages in the transcript. Next, coded data from the three transcripts were compared and contrasted and data common to all three were noted first, before attention was given to statements pertaining to two transcripts, and then to one transcript. Table 2 illustrates the initial coding process. Then, there was a search for, reviewing, and naming of themes. Through further reading of the transcripts and reflection on the coded passages, the data were condensed into themes which served as folders consisting of subthemes and detailed answers to the research questions. The three main themes resulting from the process are: (1) a spectrum of behaviors; (2) constructed explanations; and (3) suggested interventions. These themes are presented along with subthemes and representative quotes that provide an illustrative detail from the data. For purposes of the presentation, quotes are attributed to the group (identified as FGD #1, 2, or 3) but not to individual participants.

Quality Control and Trustworthiness

A few measures were taken to ensure that the findings are grounded in the data and that they are authentic and trustworthy. First, all three authors individually listened to the audio recordings and read the transcripts to fully apprise of the contents and to assure there was good correspondence between them. Second, throughout data analysis there were regular meetings during which each author made an input to shape the findings. As a result, the findings are a team product. In addition, an independent reviewer, who is familiar with the literature, audited the audio recordings and the transcripts against the themes reported in the paper. Finally, this paper has been shaped by comments and questions from participants in a qualitative analysis conference where a draft was presented by the first author.

Findings

The findings are presented under the three themes which are organized around subthemes and quotes from the transcripts.

A Spectrum of Behaviors

In the various groups, participants identified and discussed youth’s risky and antisocial behaviors that constituted a spectrum. The spectrum is presented under the following six subthemes.

Oppositional Behavior. Opposition to authority or breaking rules, such as ignoring parental advice, was identified as an important anti-social behavior among young people. For example:

I find it starts with “I am still living at home. My parents are telling me not to do these things and the more they tell me not to do them, the more I want to start doing them.” (FGD #2)
I guess ignoring authority figures such as if your parents told you to do something and you say no, I will say that is pushing the bar and bending the rules. (FGD #3)

Drugs and Alcohol Abuse. Alcohol and drug abuse was another subtheme of the risky behaviors spectrum which run across the groups. In one group, the conversation on drug use went as follows:

Drugs is one. Being involved in drugs is one.
And alcohol. So, I guess you can call alcohol a drug.
In my neighborhood you see underage drinking. You also see some form of drug use among young people. (FGD #1)

Discussants in FGD #3 made the following observations on drug abuse:

Sometimes I will walk around and I will find some kids smoking or trying to get high. It’s terrible.
I find that some kids do introduce themselves to higher drugs than weed.
... marijuana use at a young age is very common in junior high and high school.
Yes, drug use. I lost my cousin to an overdose last year.
Drugs are definitely putting youth in harm’s way.

And participants in FGD #2 seemed to agree with a member who shared the following:

I see a lot of binge drinking and not knowing limits, a lot of alcohol poisoning. Or even if it doesn’t get to the level of alcohol poisoning, just passing out.

Risky Sexual Practices. Risky sexual activities were an important part of the behaviors spectrum. In at least two

Table 2. Summary of Coded Data on Youth Risky/Anti-Social Behaviors.

Topic	Initial codes	Tentative themes & subthemes
Behaviors or attitudes of young people that may put them at risk of harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drug use - Underage drinking - Binge drinking - Bending the rules - Ignoring authority figures - Opposing parental/caregiver advice - Having unprotected sex - Having sex with unfamiliar people - Engaging in anonymous hook-ups - Prostitution - Getting into crime - Getting into gangs - Ripping each other off - Planning fights - Bullying - Smoking—trying to get high - Illegal driving—driving without license - Driving while high on drugs - Eating junk food - Hanging out with bad adults 	<p>A spectrum of youth risky/anti-social behaviors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drugs and alcohol abuse - Bullying - aggression - Oppositional behavior - Risky sexual practices - Illegal driving - Engaging with unfamiliar people
Reasons for these behavior/attitudes among young people in the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Immaturity - Lack of understanding of the consequences - Peer pressure - Easy access to drugs and alcohol - Attention seeking - It is in the adrenalin—feels cool - Need to experiment - Quest to fit in - Some parents fear their children which makes them brazen even outside the home - Lack of parental discipline—over indulgence - Social disadvantage - Intergenerational—inheriting from parents - Depression stemming from relationship breakups - Reaction to anxiety stemming from academic problems, bullying or family problems - Wrong judgment for the need to belong - Escaping reality - Exercising their right to decide - Bullying as euphoric—entertaining - Over-confidence in self - A false sense of invincibility - Child protection services sometimes worsen the situation of children they have removed 	<p>Constructed explanations for youth risky/anti-social behaviors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of parental discipline, fear of the child or over-indulgence by parents - The need to belong—peer group conformity or induction by friends - Wrong judgment, immaturity and a false sense of invincibility - Escaping reality, seeking attention, reacting to anxiety and depression - Society's failure
What society can do to help address these behaviors/attitudes among young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduce stigma against youth mental health - Stop labeling/demonizing youth with mental health problems - Ensure there is continuity of mental health care - Listen and understand youth in their own terms - Do not discount youth's knowledge - Education on the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol - More programs on counseling and recreation 	<p>Suggested Interventions to address youth risky/anti-social behaviors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stop stigmatizing or labeling youth with mental health problems - Listen to youth talk about their experiences and the help they need - Education and counseling services

groups, this was of keen concern. In one group, the discussion centered on the specific practice of prostitution, which participants felt was not great. The sentiments were captured in the following statement made by a participant:

I think of prostitution. I know that a lot more of young people are getting into that at a younger age, whether that be from exploitation or they feel they have to because they are not doing well at home or have no way of making money. (FGD #2)

In a second group (FGD #3), participants talked about risky sexual practices in general, as illustrated in the following:

... risky sexual behaviours with hook-ups, which is like fine. Like generally, I think hook-ups are fine, but I think they are not always done safely.
Like, you are not telling people where you are going.
Or, maybe, if you are under the influence of something, you are not using protection.
Or it is a bad date and then something happens. Like, I don't want to blame it on Tinder or anything. But dating apps don't help.
Yeah. You don't know who is involved. It's anonymous hook up culture.

Bullying—Aggression. Aggression, including bullying and violence, was identified as a concern mainly in FGD #1. Representative statements that captured this concern are as follows:

Nowadays there is a lot of bullying one another and taking advantage of one another as well.
Yes, bullying and just disrespect that I will say 10% of students do.
I find that a lot of young people I know plan fights. So, they will have the time and place for the fight.
Getting violent. I guess that is a big one.

Engaging With Unfamiliar People. Engaging closely with people you know little about was another behavior viewed as risky by participants in FGD #1. According to participants, because one cannot tell people's hidden intentions, establishing closeness with random people is risky. The following are illustrative:

Talking to strangers. Making eye contacts with someone you don't know.
Even maybe going around and being saucy or trying to have ego can attract the wrong sorts of people.
And, basically, in my opinion, you shouldn't do that. Basically, if someone comes up talking to you, for example, you shouldn't really engage in that conversation. You are putting yourself at risk.
Yes, you could potentially get kidnapped or something, or someone could hurt you or steal your purse or something.

Illegal Driving. A sixth behavior in the spectrum was illegal driving. In FGD #3 where this came up, illegal driving was identified as having teenagers behind the wheel who are not appropriately licensed. For example:

Teenagers driving without correct driving license. I actually lost friends last two years from driving without the correct license.

That is really a big deal nowadays, because if you are a 13-, 14-year-old behind the wheel of a car, they really can cause harm.

Constructed Explanations

Constructed explanations was the second theme in the data. Here, participants identified factors or reasons to which they attributed risky and anti-social behaviors among young people. The theme comprises five sub-themes as presented below.

The Need to Belong—Peer Group Conformity and Induction. The need to belong or the pressure to conform, where some youth are introduced to certain things by peers, was identified as a route to risky behaviors by some youth, whether or not they are aware of the consequences. The following excerpts are illustrative of this subtheme:

Some kids do introduce themselves to higher drugs than weed. And they get it from someone they just met, or they get introduced to it by someone else. (FGD #3)
Not to mention, they are probably getting into it so that they look cool to the older kids. It's probably like peer pressure or something that's why I want to get into it. (FGD #2)
Peer pressure, definitely. Like when people feel pressured to fit in, they will do whatever. Like playing around, getting into trouble, breaking the law, tickets, doing drugs and even getting into gangs and stuff like that. (FGD #2)
Oh, when I was in Junior High, I would see bullies and they were youth who had great company. I mean, other youth are friends with them. Other youth would laugh at their bully-jokes and they tagged along. I was obviously part of that. (FGD #3)
You know, people do that and influence you. Like in friendships and stuff there are people who will take their friends towards drugs. (FGD #1)
I also think it's not because of lack of knowledge. It depends on the person and what they are going through. When it comes to drugs, like lately especially younger kids in grade 7 are getting introduced to that. (FGD #1)
And I feel like it's because they think it's cool or higher kids are doing it. "It's cool and I want to fit in." (FGD #1)

Wrong Judgment: Immaturity and a False Sense of Invincibility. Wrong judgment (making bad decisions or choices) either due to immaturity—a limited ability to analyze the consequences of a behavior—or an exaggerated sense of capacity to escape from danger was another reason for risky behaviors. This subtheme is captured in the following statements:

They go to places that they shouldn't be. For example, a party with alcohol provided or weed provided and they know they shouldn't be there, but they sneak out of the

house and they know they shouldn't do that. Sometimes people go to the wrong places at the wrong time. (FGD #2)
It's like doing bad things is adrenalin. Like, people want to experience stuff. And I guess being at a younger age, people probably think that it is cool, what they call experimentation. (FGD #2)

Some youth put themselves out there too much in a way that they feel like nothing can put them down. It's like over-confidence and that could lead to danger. (FGD #3)

Some youth tend to push the limits of what they are allowed to do. Like, bend the rules and such, and that can get them in trouble. (FGD #3)

It has a lot to do with immaturity, but adults do it too. But adults have reasons to do it. Let's just say it has to do with immaturity. (FGD #3)

Parental Laxity: Lack of Discipline, Over-Indulgence by Parents. The failure of parents to discipline or appropriately groom children was identified as another reason for anti-social behavior among young people. Some group discussants felt that some parents not only fail to hold children to appropriate behavior standards, but also appear to be afraid of their own children. The result of this, according to participants, was children becoming stubborn and disrespectful even outside of the home. For example:

These days, in this generation, it is like parents are not disciplining their kids enough and they grow up to be disrespectful or think they are above the world and they can do what they want. (FGD #2)

... everything gets handed to some children and they grow up the worst cases, especially through high school. (FGD #1)

... a lot youth being spoiled and they walk in school just causing trouble, being disrespectful and doing things they shouldn't be involved in. (FGD #1)

In recent days we have seen that some kids are getting more brazen. For a lot of kids it just has to do with parents almost afraid of their own kids. (FGD #3)

And the next thing you know, they have their kids standing up to them and it's like a reverse process. (FGD #3)

Yes, some kids will stand up to their parents and then they think they can stand up to anyone too and do whatever they want and walk over people. (FGD #3)

Escaping Reality: Seeking Attention or Reacting to Anxiety/Depression. Across the groups, escaping reality at home or in school was a major reason for risky and anti-social behavior. Some of the discussants reasoned that some youth get into these behaviors as a way of coping with adversity, reacting to anxiety or depression, or just to attract attention they have not been given. Concerning drug and alcohol abuse, the discussion in one group went as follows:

A lot of these youth were born into it. Like their parents had addictions and stuff like that, or they were in foster care, or some of them, their parents are dead. (FGD #1)

But some kids get into drugs maybe because of their families at home, like they try to escape reality and they use drugs as a way. (FGD #1)

Yeah, it's kind of escaping reality for them. It is the way they are coping. You know what I mean? (FGD #1)

Similar sentiments were expressed in the other groups; youth were either dealing with difficult emotions and feelings or they were seeking attention from adult figures. The following are representative of the discussions:

I was going to say anxiety and depression. Like people could have personal issues like anxiety with school and that could be the reason why someone goes to alcohol and drugs. Like, get a relief. (FGD #2)

And bullying, and there is a lot of stuff with family problems where we don't know what's going on in each other's lives. (FGD #2)

It is also like looking for escape from your life that you end up gravitating towards a group of people. And while that may seem cool at first, it may lead to drug use, getting into crimes and ripping each other off. (FGD #2)

... it could be the emotion of sadness and hatred; like somebody is going through a bad break up and they want to try and forget everything that happened within the relationship. (FGD #3)

It can also lead to someone probably trying to eat out their sadness and hatred by eating all these fast foods, like my 600-pound life. (FGD #3)

I think the biggest part is like if they are trying to get help and they keep turning them away for mental health concerns or addictions and so they act in these ways so they get attention, for someone to realize that, okay, something is seriously wrong here. (FGD #3)

Another thing is, a lot of us feel like we are misunderstood sometimes, that people perceive us the wrong way. And you don't always get the chance to make a second impression. (FGD #3)

Society's Failure. Society's failure was explained in the form of young people not getting the supports they need, and by the fact that they have easy access to drugs and alcohol. This theme came up mainly in FGD #3, and some discussants shared their personal experiences. The following captures some of the discussion:

Drug abuse and alcohol use which I also engaged in heavily, I should say. I don't anymore, but I did for a long time, because I was generally unsafe. I think a lot of young people here are.

... that comes from a place of individual circumstances. I don't think it is a youth issue. I think it is a society issue. I

don't think we have a lot of great support and services available for youth.

Access is a big part of it, because I see it everywhere. Drugs and alcohol are a part of this community.

I find downtown to be really a dark underbelly of drugs. There is a lot of space set up that encourages that. It is a big part of our culture.

I guess it is pretty much right in front of them, they can get it when they want.

But I also think that because Newfoundland is generally seen as safe, a lot of parents are not very diligent in recognizing those behaviors. Or they don't have the education to understand it better or they don't know how to address it with the youth.

Suggested Interventions

This theme captures participants' ideas about what measures could help to address youth risky/anti-social behaviors; either by preventing youth from engaging in these behaviors or by helping those who are already caught in the spectrum to overcome and move on. Their ideas are presented in the following four subthemes.

Stop Stigmatizing or Labeling Youth Who Have Mental Health Problems. Although this suggestion did not run through all the FGDs, in at least two groups, participants felt that many youth with mental health challenges are not given appropriate attention, and this pushes some into risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse. In FGD #3, when this topic was discussed, one participant shared their experience to sum it up as follows:

I will say, to take as many steps as we can to reduce stigma. For example, I had an appointment back in February. I think I had missed an appointment, but I had no idea. They didn't contact me; I didn't get a letter. So, when I showed up for the appointment on the day that I thought was the right date, they told me that I was a no show. So, they labelled me with an inappropriate label that had nothing to do with my actions. They labelled me as no show and put it in my file, which then discriminates against me on future appointments. It makes me get to the bottom of the appointment lists and that was not something that was my fault and they reprimanded me for it.

There was a similar concern in FGD #2. When a participant made the following observation, there were head-nods and yeses in agreement:

I find that a lot of people, instead of accepting patients or people with mental health, I find that Eastern Health demonizes people with mental health issues or just patients generally. I find that there is the lack of continuity of care and I find that the fragmentation of patient care means that a lot

of people get lost in the system and I think that young people are struggling.

Listen to Youth Talk About Their Experiences and the Help They Need. Similar to the preceding suggestion, there was the suggestion that young people should be listened to, so that they are better understood and the help they need is provided. A capturing statement in FGD #2 went like this:

I think that the community should listen more to young people. A lot of people think that we don't know stuff. But we are kind of the experts of our own lives. So, if we need something, we should be able to go to some place, for example, to the Waterford hospital if we need help, and not be turned away. Like actually get the help that we need.

Discussants in FGD #1 were specific about the need for child and youth protection workers to do better with youth. The following stood out in the discussion:

The big thing that needs to be done, and I think a lot of people agree with me, is child, youth and family services. Like they say they bring the family back together, but that is really not the case. ... they are more like break the family apart, and I think that needs to be talked about more.

Yes, improve on child, youth and family services to ensure youth are not inappropriately removed from their families.

Yes, you don't really hear about them, like social workers that remove kids and stuff.

I actually agree with you, because for someone who has been through the system, like they had reasons to take me, but I have seen some families torn apart because neighbours calling because they hate people.

Education and Counseling Services. Finally, the need to educate young people on the dangers of certain practices as well as supporting them with recreational activities was identified as a way to prevent risky behaviors. This topic was mainly discussed in FGD #3. Participants agreed that education is needed since some youth engage in risky behaviors for lack of knowledge of the consequences. They also reasoned that engaging youth in sports and recreation is a way of channeling their energies away from inappropriate behaviors and into positive practices. Key statements of the discussion included the following:

More social programs for younger youths, like sports and recreation. Anything that will help them stay away from bad behavior.

I guess to have programs with presentations to show them what happens and what the effects of doing drugs have on people.

Also, informational sessions where youth can understand the negative effects of their behaviors. Free learning to help them understand.

I guess learning to stop any form of violence. Because once you get the knowledge, you understand. Cos usually when people are violent, they don't understand.

Yes, cos in my experience, when people don't understand, they get fearful. And when they get fearful, that is when they become more violent.

Discussion

This study contributes to extant literature by identifying a spectrum of RASB among youth, constructing reasons for these behaviors, and proposing interventions to address them from the perspectives of young people. Constructivist and interpretive perspectives where reality is determined through the social processes of subjectivity and intersubjectivity (Best, 2015; Dello Buono, 2015; Harris, 2006; Pfohl, 2004; Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985) informed the study, and data were collected in focus groups and analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nyumba et al., 2018). The findings are put in conversation with existing literature to highlight the study's contribution to knowledge.

One of the thematic findings of the study is a "spectrum of behaviors" which participants claimed constitutes RASB among youth. Illegal and illicit drug and alcohol use, illegal driving, bullying, and unsafe sexual practices, among others, were described as risky and antisocial by participants. The justification of these behaviors as risky and antisocial was built around the point that they either violate social norms and expectations or they have direct or indirect negative consequences, such as harm to self or others and/or falling into trouble with the law. While some of the participants spoke from personal experience, others did so from what they have witnessed in the community. Participants constructed knowledge on RASB in conversation with one another in the FGDs, which allows for the grounded nature of this knowledge and emphasizes the constructionist nature of the social reality of RASB among youth.

The RASB discussed by participants in this study are consistent with what has been reported in the empirical literature. Prominent among these behaviors in the literature are risky sexual behaviors, drug and alcohol use problems, bullying behavior, and gang and gun violence (Abby et al., 2007; Adams et al., 2014; Beck et al., 2019; Eaton et al., 2007; King et al., 2012; Quinn & Fromme, 2010; Sears et al., 2007; Shi et al., 2020; Wagenaar et al., 2018). However, a number of RASB are apparently unique to the current study. One of such is the finding that illegal driving (i.e., driving while below the legal age or with no proper license) is a RASB. As it was made clear in the FGD, driving while too young and without

the proper license poses the risk of injury to oneself and to other road users (one participant shared how they lost two friends to this behavior a few years prior). A second finding that is unique to the study is the claim that engaging with strangers or unfamiliar people as though they were known and trustful (i.e., initiating a conversation with or obliging an invitation to do so) is a risky behavior among youth. According to participants, even making eye contact with unfamiliar people is a risky behavior that should be avoided, as it can attract the wrong people to you and lead to a potential kidnap, abuse, or robbery. Another unique finding of the study is the view that the practice of arranging to have sexual intimacy by means of a hook-up is a risky sexual behavior. Although some participants felt that the hook-up culture per se is not bad, they reasoned that the practice of anonymous hook-up done through dating apps such as Tinder is risky. According to participants, anonymously hooked-up partners may discover that they are incompatible and may end up hurting each other.

In addition, whereas other studies have reported RASB as an objective reality discovered among youths who are the units of analysis, RASB in the current study are a social reality constructed through the subjective and intersubjective processes of dialogue and interaction, what Best (2015) refers to as "framing" and "claims-making." The significance of the constructed nature of RASB is that attention is drawn to the context- and time-sensitive nature of these behaviors. This, in turn, makes clear that contextual and temporal differences will result in qualitative differences in the magnitude, duration, and impact of these behaviors among youth, so that interventions are customized.

This study also established the theme of "constructed explanations"; that is, participants' constructed reasons or attributions for RASB among young people in this social context. Some of participants' attributions, such as family adversity, poverty, peer influence, reacting to anxiety or depression, and so on, converge with what is reported in the risk and protective factors literature (Baharudin et al., 2011; Beck et al., 2019; Berti & Pivetti, 2019; K. K. Childs et al., 2022; Clemente et al., 2008; Diaz et al., 2020; Hofmann & Müller, 2018; Lee et al., 2016; Logan-Greene et al., 2023; Odimegwu & Ugwu, 2022; Park et al., 2013; Salo et al., 2022; Waller et al., 2014; Yazdi-Feyzabadi et al., 2019). However, participants' framing of the issues gives an insight that goes beyond the limited "A is associated with B" conclusions in the literature. For example, whereas existing literature focuses on childhood family adversity, such as poverty, child abuse, and exposure to family violence as the main predictors of RASB, participants in this study explain that lack of discipline or over-indulgence of the child may also lead to RASB. Participants reasoned that when

parents fail to discipline the child, when they over pamper the child, or appear to be afraid of the child, the young fellow may develop an entitlement mentality and come to feel that they can “stand up to” or “walk over” other people in the community. In addition, participants bring an interesting dimension to the usual notion that some RASB are a response to stress stimuli, such as anxiety and depression (Agnew, 1992; Su et al., 2011). According to participants, although anxiety or depression may be present, the RASB is not merely a reaction to such, but a goal-directed action; it is the adolescent’s way of coping or of drawing someone’s attention to the fact that “something is seriously wrong here.” The finding that youth RASB are also attributable to “immaturity” or “a false sense of invincibility” as well as to society’s failure is probably a unique addition to the literature. According to participants, some youth make the wrong choice of engaging in RASB either because they lack the capacity to understand the consequences or because they have a false belief of invincibility; this false belief makes some youth “put themselves out there too much.” In addition, participants interpreted young people’s access to drugs as well as the space to engage in risky sexual practices as society’s failure to provide attention and support for youth. According to participants, when alcohol and drugs are “a big part of our culture” and, when some parts of the community are “a dark underbelly of drugs,” it would not be surprising that youth have alcohol and drug use issues. What this finding suggests is that at this moment in history, NL has a drug and alcohol use culture where, in their everyday exploration, youth have access to these. As participants pointed out, drugs and alcohol are present at parties and at designated street corners. Perhaps Canada’s legalization and regulation of the production, distribution, and possession of cannabis—marijuana—in 2018 (Government of Canada, n.d.) is a temporal and contextual contributory factor to the drug culture in NL.

The third theme in the findings is participants’ suggested interventions. To help youth overcome RASB, participants reasoned that three things should happen: stop stigmatizing or labeling youth; give youth enough attention and space to talk about their experiences and to describe the help they need; and provide education, counseling, and recreation services to young people. As an interpretive framing process, there seems to be congruence between the identified reasons for youth RASB and the suggested ways of addressing them. For example, if RASB is due to lack of understanding, education will help youth appreciate the “dangers” of these behaviors and perhaps dissuade them. To address cases where youth use RASB to seek attention, participants suggested the creation of forums and services where young

people can engage with adults that will listen with empathy and with service providers who will not stigmatize. Perhaps healthcare workers and child protection social workers need to improve on their engagement with youth, in order not to inappropriately label them or remove them from their families and inadvertently push them toward RASB. Participants also suggest sports and recreation opportunities because, as they pointed out, these activities “will help them [youth] stay away from bad behavior.” Perhaps these suggestions can be put in conversation with the literature on “positive youth development interventions.” Existing literature on addressing youth RASB shows that attention has been given to areas such as: sex education, skills building, and youth developmental activities (Feinberg et al., 2013; Greene et al., 2011; Reyna & Mills, 2014); recreation, mentoring, and academic support (Bonnell et al., 2013; Gottfredson et al., 2010); and family service plus youth-led community projects (West et al., 2008). It is noteworthy, however, that a meta-analytic review of these youth development interventions found that they produced little to no effect on RASB (Ciocanel et al., 2017). The lack of intervention effects might be because these interventions were not built on or driven by knowledge gathered from young people. Perhaps stakeholders need to do more of listening than of talking to youth to help them overcome RASB.

Study Limitations

This study is grounded in constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. Therefore, the findings are not a universal knowledge of RASB or a discovery of these in their objective reality. Instead, the findings should be read as a social construction of RASB in the context of NL at a particular moment in history through the interpretive frames of youth who participated in FGDs. A limitation of the findings is that they derived from thematic analysis instead of content or another type of analysis that is applicable to focus group data. In addition, the findings are filtered through the interpretive positionality of the researchers; they are therefore not value-free. Further, the findings are limited in scope by the small number of FGDs (three groups) and by the relatively small overall number of participants (18). An additional limitation resulting from the sample is that it did not include participants from rural NL and was low in ethnic/racial diversity. We suggest that future research address these limitations by using larger, more diverse, samples for focus groups and/or individual interviews and employing other methods for analyzing focus group and qualitative data.

Conclusion

Three themes which emerged from the data and constituted findings of the study are: a spectrum of behaviors; constructed explanations; and suggested interventions. From the interpretive frames of participants, behaviors that constitute RASB among youth in NL include risky sexual practices, drug and alcohol use, illegal driving, bullying, oppositional or rule-breaking behavior, and engaging with strangers. The grounded nature of this knowledge aside, the finding that illegal driving and dealing with strangers are RASB among youth in NL is a unique addition to the literature. Additionally, although the constructed explanations or reasons for RASB in the findings converge greatly with findings in the objectivist literature, they add nuance and introduce new insights. For example, contrary or in addition to the simplistic view that some behaviors are a problematic response to anxiety, this study shows that the behavior may, in fact, be a strategic move to gain what the youth has been deprived of. Again, contrary to the “settled knowledge” that abuse and neglect push youth toward RASB, the findings here show that over-indulgence or over-protection may just as well result in these behaviors. Furthermore, the study extends the literature by showing that immaturity, which feeds into a false belief of self-efficacy, and society’s failure are reasons for RASB among youth. An instance of society’s failure, for example, is that drugs and alcohol are ever present in the environment, and easily accessible to youth. When this presence interacts with a false sense of invincibility, the adolescent may engage in drug and alcohol use. The logical end point of the findings is the suggested interventions to address youth RASB. These are probably heavily imbued with practical, material, and symbolic meaning. When we stop labeling youth and rather listen to them talk about their experiences and their needs, then we will plan more appropriate services, such as education and counseling, and provide relevant activities, such as sports and recreation to support them.

Research and Practice Implications

This study has implications for research and for practice. Although the study contributes to the literature and fills some gap in Canada and NL, further research is suggested that uses greater numbers of FGDs or individual interviews involves many young participants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and from rural and urban communities. In addition, future research would do well to apply content analysis methods to focus group data to report quantitative and qualitative findings. This type of research might, among others, investigate what

interventions would be effective in helping youth stay away from RASB as well as evaluate current and future interventions.

On the practice side, this study suggests some measures. Counseling services are important. This will help youth get the attention they need to talk about their experiences and perhaps deal with anxiety or depression that may underlie some of their behaviors. Recreation is also suggested, as this would connect youth to good adult role models, enhance socioemotional health, and keep them away from bad company. Although some of these services may already be present, the findings suggest the need to invest more into expanding these services and to periodically evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions. Training and retraining of professionals in youth-friendly and safer practices would be important. Professionals that work with youth need to understand and avoid practices that are perceived by young people as stigmatizing and exclusionary. For example, the study suggests that child protective services workers need to review practice protocols to ensure youth are not removed from their familiar environment for the wrong reasons. Finally, this study calls for more education and awareness on the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol as well as the need to tighten controls on adolescents’ access to these substances.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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